The Meadowlark Comes Back

An Optimist's Claim to the American Dream

A novel by Clayton H. Nelson

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This story is true
in the sense that
a blade of grass is true,
yet all characters and
incidents are fictitious.

C.H.N.

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Rapidly Melting Snow

A speech is in progress at a large Philadelphia lecture theater by a twenty-year-old North Dakota youth. His name is Roger Dahl, and he also wrote the oration.

"Let's consider tolerance in another light. Tolerance is a broad term and can be handled without fear of breakage.

"At birth, man has tolerance. Have you seen a little child – in reacting to a situation – be influenced by race, color, or creed?

"Childish arguments – quick to begin – are as quickly forgotten. And despite the anxious mother, the hour's enemy is the next hour's friend.

"It's a sad fact that a growing child must acquire a collar. The collar – which sometimes wears out before the person – is called 'inhibition'.

"With inhibition, another force appears. I call it 'conscious human influence.'

"For example, if an adolescent protests in opposition, it should not be alarming. With heredity thrown in for inspiration, he is the product of the next that brought him forth."

In the momentary silence of the auditorium, a bespectacled newspaperman – typically blinking and fidgeting – sits motionless, straining to pluck the next concept from the youngster's speech.

"Then, an unscheduled day will appear, 'The day of ponderance', a day of self-examination. On that day, man says to himself, 'Is what I believe true? Am I to remain exclusively my parents' child? Or can I become my own man? Is the favor I have enjoyed by birth a true one?"

Comfortable on stage, Roger Dahl's likable grin encourages compact smiles from the audience throughout the impressive hall.

"'The day of ponderance' is not a picnic. Many do not have time to observe it. Between us – if we come to some useful conclusions – we can share our developed thoughts with a neighbor."

In the front row, with legs crossed politely, is a white-haired gentleman representing the National Conference of Christians and Jews. He is a speech contest judge for the day. Lost in thought while Roger speaks, he softly murmurs an undefined reference, the gist of it oddly unrecognizable even to himself.

"A neighbor? Don't forget, tolerance is also his birth right. It's natural to say, 'I'm perfectly fine. It is my neighbor who is intolerant.' If he were tolerant, he wouldn't be so hard to get along with. Man is often a mirror that reflects the image cast upon it. Are you delayed from a spirit of tolerance because you're waiting for a neighbor to initiate it? He is influenced by what he sees. I do not invent this, but only report it."

With the audience momentarily silenced by Roger's message, the sound of water dripping from the roof's rapidly melting snow could be mistaken for hushed applause.

"Your neighbor may have his birth-given tolerance hidden away in a closet, since it often appears to him to have gone out of style. And he may have drifted away from the world of nature.

"And related to nature, an ignorant-appearing woodsman told me once, 'Tolerance is the basis of survival. Only reason we still have bears despite famine, floods and hunters is that bears take good care of their young, and don't eat other bears.'

"I hope I mentioned the man only appeared ignorant. It was an ignorant boy who judged his appearance."

The young Roger, with his conclusion on the way, doesn't blink. His ruddy cheeks glow.

"Even with man's continued inhumanity to man, the world has never known a better time or place. Thank you."

The chairman rises to his feet and announces there will be a noon recess of one hour, then the program will continue.

The newspaperman and a white-haired gentleman – both serving as judges for the contest – meet in the crowded lobby. The newspaperman speaks first.

"Fine bunch of kids. I can't get over the conviction of the kid from North Dakota. I'm curious how those people in the isolated areas could have an opinion on tolerance. They have few minorities. Generally speaking, they're of Northern European extraction. And, if anything, you'd imagine they are so clannish that tolerance would be a dirty word."

The snow-haired judge was momentarily lost in thought before his reply.

"According to the reasoning of this kid you mention, tolerance is no longer a dreamy, flowery picture to look at occasionally. It's an absolute necessity. Maybe the Midwest – which could be considered partially detached – has a view that's worth considering."

The newspaperman replies, "The way I've always had this country figured, culture belongs to the Eastern part and progress belongs to the West. I never figured the middle part for much of anything, except a place to grow food. Could be I need to rearrange some of my thinking."

The gentleman judge observes, "Maybe you're right. But when I said the middle part of the country is somewhat detached, I meant only detached in viewpoint, since most of our minority groups are in the Eastern and the Western areas."

The newspaperman questions, "Do we need tolerance in relation only to minorities, or are we falling into a bit of a thought trap?"

"That's a good point," the gentleman says. "I guess we need tolerance whenever two people sit down at the same table. Maybe tolerance within families and family groups would be a good place to begin."

The newspaperman remembers something. "In our own country, a great deal of progress has already been made. You take the fields of religion, education, athletics and music, for example. A lot of good has been done in all of them."

The gentleman shrugs with folded arms. "Whenever you start feeling confident, look over at what you see in American politics. In so many cases, ambition exceeds principle. Of course, if our people improve, our politics will have to improve also."

At this point, Roger Dahl, the young speaker from North Dakota, and a much older companion are discussing something at a nearby exit. The companion starts in the direction of the newspaperman after nudging Roger gently in the ribs. The reporter takes hasty leave of the gentleman judge, saying, "Excuse me, I want to check this guy. I'm curious."

When the two are within a few feet, the conversation begins.

"Pardon me, sir, I represent the press. Could I have a moment of your time? I heard the boy from North Dakota just speak. Are you his father?"

"No, sir, I'm his speech instructor."

"Oh, then, I must compliment you. Fine job."

"Thank you. Of course, any coach has a fairly decent time if he gets good material."

"This boy, I assume, represents the efforts of particularly zealous parents. Is he an only child?"

"No, he's the fourth of his family to attend my classes. He's very good, but scholastically he's not outstanding in his family. And I'd say his parents are solid but ordinary people."

"Sir, I've been around a long time. When I see a brilliant performance in any youth, I know there's got to be a story behind it. One boy like this is unusual, but four in one family is practically unbelievable to anyone but a newspaperman. All boys?"

"No, two boys and two girls."

"How would you describe the family background, may I ask?"

"Good, but not sensational."

The newspaperman asks, "What produced this boy?"

"I don't know, maybe only human progress. Or maybe a solid recognition of what's worthwhile in life. It's interesting – I'd never given any thought of what produced the boy, Roger."

Breaking eye contact, rubbing his earlobe carefully between thumb and forefinger, the typically fidgety newspaperman speaks slowly with a distant look in his eye.

"What I wouldn't give – to peel back three-quarters of a century or more – to understand how this boy arrived here with his timely plea for tolerance. That, in my line of work, makes for a good column."

His Halting English

Speaking to his wife, Nels Dahl expresses concern.

"Vair are den boys?"

He referred to his two eldest sons, who were delivering a crock of butter to the Fitzgerald Lumber Camp.

Teckla had five children younger. She felt little concern for big kids aged fourteen and seventeen.

"Daa boyss ken tak kar om dirselve."

Teckla had been born and raised in this northern Minnesota forest and knew the woods to be more of a shelter than a hazard. Her most notable venture in life had been a trip to International Falls on the day she married Nels. Even that journey had not taken her out of the forest land, but travel had been aptly described to her by Nels.

Nels Dahl, originally christened Nils Dahlen, had been born in the wooded rolling foothill region of Norway. His parental name is a descriptive geographic term in the land of his birth. But for the fact that advertising had power back in those years also, Nels Dahl would likely have been buried within a few miles of his birthplace.

Railroads in expanding America held large tracts of granted land and hit upon the idea of making this information available in Europe. A folder brimming with exciting promise fell into the strong young hands of Nels Dahl, and he was convinced that his future lay in this new land of opportunity: America.

An immigration clerk performed the name cutting operation. When the bewildered Nels tried to point out the error, the clerk told him to accept it as a favor. "I've Americanized thousands of people," he said. "Don't try to tell me my business the first day you're in this country."

Since Nels had nothing in the world but the transcript of his first papers to prove he was an individual, the name quickly scribbled on them stuck. A mysterious place called Duluth was his official destination. This had been arranged by his grandfather, who also had taken care of the details necessary in securing the boy's passage. All immigrants needed someone, preferably kinfolk, to go to upon arrival in America. Nels had a cousin in Duluth who had been contacted and was expecting the newcomer.

It was a very confused Nels that Cousin Ole met in Duluth. Nels had no idea that the whole world would come across to America along with him. Day or night, the babble of immigrants flowed around him. Had he not met a countryman aboard ship to talk with, he would surely have perished.

After a formal, old country greeting with his cousin in Duluth, Nels was soon to become further taught in the ways of his adopted land.

His cousin asked him if he'd eaten any American candy yet. Since Nels, of course, hadn't, Ole reached in his pocket and extracted a dark brown plug. The curious and eager-to-learn Nels watched as Ole whittled off a piece about an inch and a half square with a pocketknife. Ole cut a much smaller piece for himself, and Nels was impressed with his generosity.

It happened that Nels had no luggage. He had put on all his clothes and thrown his suitcase away a few hours before. The afternoon was warm and Nels decided it wasn't wise to wear several pair of trousers and socks all at one time.

His discomfort was increased by the fact that the American candy, while tasting somewhat sweet, seemed to make his stomach roll when he swallowed it. When the walk to Ole's boarding house had progressed a few more blocks, Nels was sweating profusely and swallowing almost constantly. Ole, meanwhile, chatted away in Norwegian, seemingly unaware of Nels' suffering. Soon the game came to its conclusion. Nels had to go behind a hedge and vomit. Ole's reaction was surprising. He slapped his thigh and bellowed with laughter. Nels paused in his retching and thought what an odd land he'd come to. Even sickness was a funny thing over here.

He recovered sufficiently, to snicker politely when Ole told him that the candy was actually tobacco.

Later years would find Nels pondering the joke occasionally, yet he never fully appreciated it, nor did he ever again use tobacco.

It was a pallid, sick-looking youth who mounted the boarding house stairs with Ole. The husky Norwegian girl who was employed there to help the cook noticed the newcomer and was startled. She turned to her workmate and said something to the effect that you don't even need to be healthy anymore to come to America.

The lady who ran the boarding house had been in America nine years and was what a later day would describe as well-read and well-integrated. She recalled that she and her group of young domestic servants had left Norway insisting the English language be used during all meal periods. This condition was not without its difficulties, so it was customary for a recruit to point to dishes he would like if his command of the new tongue was slight. She was a powerful advocate of the then-existing night school. Under her firm guidance, many a devilish Norwegian immigrant was led to value good manners and good speech.

The first word Nels learned in America was "job." Only it wouldn't come out of his mouth like that, no matter how he struggled. The end result was "yob." The task of pronouncing "job" was abandoned for the more immediate necessity of getting one. In that matter, Cousin Ole, who had been in Duluth almost three years, supplied the answers.

This was the year that a large hotel was being constructed in Duluth. To the populace of the Twin Ports, it was not only large, but almost breathtaking. Monday morning found newcomer Nels Dahl pushing a wheelbarrow up a plank incline. Muscles long unused during the trip across the ocean became sore and painful. Nels was amazed at how easy it was to get employment in his new locale. He was soon to see that while finding work was comparatively simple in that day, losing it was also accomplished with ease.

Strenuous as the work was, it was no problem compared with the language barrier. His foreman was of German extraction and was overly conscious of his inability to speak English well. This fact turned a misunderstood order into a personal affront and kept the entire crew edgy.

The struggle to adjust to these seemingly impossible conditions did have some compensation. The exhausted boy was asleep early every evening and thus had few bouts with the newcomer's usual enemy, homesickness.

These were not men of flowers and lace. In three months, Nels was beginning to thrive in the same conditions that had almost thrown him. The girl at the boarding house would chide him gently about his ravenous appetite. The life that Nels had worked so hard to establish took a turn that looked to him like stark tragedy. On a Wednesday noon, he was canned.

Unbeknownst to Nels, immigration had not stopped on the day he arrived in Duluth. In that day it was only logical that Norsemen associated with Norsemen, Germans with Germans, Poles with their countrymen, and any nationality would give preference to his own. This was later to be condemned as "clannishness," but without it there could never have been a powerful America. Many of the supervisors on the hotel project were of German extraction, and gradually their countrymen replaced the so-called "foreigner."

This perplexing situation was explained to Nels at the boarding house. His first thought had been that somewhere he must have been negligent in his duty. He was further advised that since it was a game, Nels might as well participate. There was a contractor who had a long-term project across the bay in Superior, Wisconsin. What made this man noteworthy was the fact that he was a Norwegian. If Nels couldn't get a "yob" there, he might as well pack up and go back to Norway.

Newcomer Nels Dahl was rapidly learning how things worked in his new land, so he did not apply for this prospective job in his halting English. When he finally gained the attention of the busy, hustling contractor, his opening remarks were in fluent Norse. The speeding manager not only stopped, but he also hired Nels

immediately. In less than five minutes a puzzled crew saw their chief motionless with his arm around a youth's shoulder, making dozens of inquiries about the old country.

The change in employment made a change in the routine of the young newcomer's life. Instead of rising at five in the morning to work in Duluth, Nels now crawled out at four thirty to work in Superior.

His new boss "Big Yon" was a hard, exacting man, but in that day, he was considered to be just. His black plug hat and walrus mustache were seen bobbing around the job constantly. He was sharp and business-like in manner, yet had endless patience in instructing a young man. Provided, of course, the young man wanted to learn. If the pupil was indifferent, he was promptly let go, unless he was of Norwegian extraction. In that case he was subjected to an acid tongue-lashing in a language he plainly understood. Few underwent that experience without purging their souls.

Summer faded into fall, and Nels was beginning to find enjoyment in his orderly life. He attended night school with a group from the boarding house, and his education was furthered by the discussions that took place among the immigrants after the enlightening sessions. He also enjoyed observing downtown happenings in Duluth and Superior, where stray cows occasionally interrupted the horse-drawn traffic. So, he was not totally unprepared for an occurrence that took place during the holiday season.

Nels and his fellow workers sensed that "Big Yon" was brooding about something. He had been unusually docile for several days. On a Saturday morning a few days before Christmas, Big Yon assembled his men and told them to have the tools locked up by noon as he was going to buy a Christmas drink. They had finished a crucial phase of their project, and the entire crew was engaged in final trimming and clean-up before beginning the next step.

When the twelve o'clock whistle blew, the job was shipshape and the crew jubilant. The long-handled, round-shaped dinner pails hung in the warming shack untouched and forgotten.

A long-bearded, bald bartender was startled by the rush to his door. He hastily wiped his hands on his apron and prepared to do business – and business he did.

Scandinavian Man Wanted

During the early part of the thirsty afternoon, every detail of the job was discussed. Several times, Big Yon had to be consulted to clarify an issue of debate. Later, a wave of nostalgia swept over the group, and the topic was almost exclusively the old country.

As darkness began to settle over the town, Big Yon stayed more to himself, apparently still brooding. Finally, the cup overflowed, and Big Yon smashed a huge fist on the bar and demanded attention. In the silence that followed, he announced that he was going to make a speech.

Diluted grain alcohol had dissolved the wax in his mustache, so as the huge leader climbed atop a sixteen-gallon beer keg, he had to brush aside his badge of manhood in order to talk.

He rumbled in gruff Norse that he had been going over the ledger the past few evenings and was highly pleased with what he found. While the assembly roared their approval, Big Yon reached up with both hands and tried to plaster the drooping mustache against his cheeks.

Back in action again, he informed the group that progress being made was due chiefly to the fine caliber of his crew. He said that during the afternoon he had considered a brief vacation in Norway for the entire crew, but since Lake Superior was frozen over, maybe the ocean was in bad shape also. He told them he had turned it over in his mind for a half hour or more and finally settled on another plan of reward.

Bloodshot eyes strained into focus as the reeling speaker came to his point. The entire crew was invited to accompany the chief on an expense-paid trip to the house of painted ladies. As he dismounted from the keg, he bellowed out an afterthought in English, "Big Yon pay for evryting."

The saloon, so quickly walked into at noon, was vacated even more rapidly.

An officer of the law observed this happening despite the dim light. Since his job and his life depended on good judgment, he changed course sharply and headed towards the tea shop.

Big Yon had not reached his station in life without strategy. As the group ascended the long stairs, he posted his squad at doors along the way. When the last tread was reached, Big Yon was alone – except for a gallon tin of one hundred eighty proof grain alcohol under his left arm.

In tones befitting a Roman senator he declared the establishment officially closed to outside business. He also ordered all able-bodied males to leave at once. Because of his thick accent, the proclamation was not instantly understood. In about thirty seconds a burly chap leaped out of his chair and shouted, "No bloomin' roundhead is gonna tell McGinty when he leaves!"

He was pole-axed by one hefty swing of Big Yon's arm, the tin of alcohol hardly stirring in the movement. Since the fallen McGinty was blocking passage, he was dragged to the head of the stairs whereupon he was carefully shuffled from hand to hand and finally deposited outside in a waiting snowbank.

The madame, no stranger to violence, said nothing but nodded in steady agreement.

A girl in the rearmost corridor screamed, not knowing if it was a raid or an invasion by a foreign power.

And so was born the Upper Midwest's first employee and management Christmas party. If not the first, certainly the most uninhibited.

When the bleary-eyed host was presented with the bill the next morning, he put his head in his huge hands and groaned, "Big Yon never do data yen."

After the turn of the century, and quite a few years beyond, Big Yon was to listen politely while his son explained a new discovery in human relations. It was called "employee morale". The big fellow grinned, because had his English been better, he could have written that textbook a quarter of a century earlier.

The crew remained intact throughout the winter, but spring's restlessness caused quite a few changes.

When migratory fowl were seen winging overhead and a stirring began in Duluth's Twin Ports' harbor, Nels began to feel a tremendous longing for his first home.

Several of his immigrant friends had already struck out for new adventure. Roaming fever, bred into Norsemen for centuries, was not easily ignored, so it was not surprising that Nels was soon seeking advice from his boss and mentor.

He was told by Big Yon that America was a great land largely because the individual had freedom of choice in work or travel. Nels had the potential to become an excellent bricklayer, plasterer or carpenter, he was told. The advice, given in Norse, was summarized like this, "Go on out, get it out of your system, but don't go so far you can't get back. If Big Yon is breathing, there'll be a job for you if you want one."

About a week later, Nels eyed the lower left corner of a large blackboard in the window of a Duluth labor hall. The ad read, "Young Scandinavian man wanted to help clear brush in Northern Minnesota. No bad habits. Will be in town Tuesday noon."

Tuesday night, Nels, with his boarding house farewells behind him, slept in the woods some sixteen miles north of Duluth. Beside him was his new employer, a short Danish man named Jens Hansen. By Wednesday night their walking had brought them to a small community called Virginia, where they slept in a livery stable.

As the journey progressed steadily, Nels became curious as to his destination. He had never asked, and Jens had never volunteered the information. Since he was a lad not easily alarmed, Nels thought nothing of it with the conclusion that he could walk as far north as the Dane could. Friday afternoon answered his question, as he and Jens Hansen came to a clearing in the woods and the latter announced they were home.

Home was a solid, well-built cabin that consisted of a main building plus two additions that were called "lean-tos." The one on the north side had been recently cleared of miscellaneous farm implements and supplies. It was designated as Nels' bunk. It developed that the lean-to on the south side of the main building was occupied by a pretty, blue-eyed, seventeen-year-old girl.

Her name was Teckla Hansen, and she was the only child of Jens and Sina Hansen.

Since Jens was a Dane, he had a natural interest in dairy cattle. Also because of his nationality, he was a jovial man, but had behind his good humor a streak of stubbornness of a tenacity seldom equaled on this good earth.

Stubbornness brought Jens to America. He believed twenty years previously that a move to America was an intelligent decision for a young European. His relatively wealthy clan in old Denmark argued otherwise. Already middle-aged, he had proved to his family his courage and conviction. Jens bundled up the childless Sina and came to America.

Nels Dahl blended into the woodland routine easily. He lost count of days and months in the intriguing battle against the wilderness. His English, never very good, deteriorated almost entirely. The tongue spoken in the snug cabin was a mixture of Danish and Norse with a few English words thrown in occasionally for flavor.

The stubbornness that had brought Jens Hansen to this new land also permitted him to survive well under conditions that today would be called horrifying.

The four of them worked endlessly to enlarge the pasture that provided them with food and income. Although the work was always a group affair, it was quite some time before Teckla would accept Nels as a friend.

Increasing interest in the work, plus the pleasant, relaxed way of life made Nels nearly forget his job waiting in the Twin Ports. Occasionally he would remember the statement in the labor hall window "No bad habits" and chuckle, "What would a fellow do with bad habits out here?"

It was surprising to Nels that he and Teckla had become lovers almost immediately after they became friends. This fact caused no alarm in the foursome, as apparently Jens and Sina did not notice it at all.

Teckla's birth had been a surprise to her parents that they never completely got over. Since she was born late in her mother's life, nature precluded the possibility of her ever having a playmate. Jens and Sina concluded that the climate in the old country was wrong for them.

Both eventually went to their graves convinced that if they had only come to America sooner, they would have a large family.

Nature is at work continuously in the forest, and sometimes not exclusively with the creatures of the wild. So, as surely as daylight follows moonlight, the night had to come when one of the little lean-tos was unoccupied. Later the morning came when Teckla could not attend breakfast because she was vomiting.

It was to be one of the few times in Nels' life when he was confused. His thoughts swung wildly from bitter self-reproach to worry over the inevitable discovery. At night, when snores from the main lodge brought an eager Teckla to his bunk, he was torn between tenderness and a desire to grab his packsack and go out to sleep in the woods.

The situation tormented Nels for several weeks. He tried to visualize a similar happening in the old country. Teckla and he talked it over at length. She could see nothing amiss. She had been raised in the woods without neighbor or social standard, and to Teckla, wise only in the teachings of nature, convention was a word to describe a gathering of people.

Upon his daughter's fourth or fifth absence from the table, Jens brought the crisis into open air. He simply leaned back in his chair, picking his teeth with a wooden match, and said quietly that it might be a good idea if they took a few days off and went to International Falls for a wedding. He and Sina would like to go along, but someone had to stay with the cows. Besides, he added in the mixed-up language, it was foolish to heat both of those lean-tos.

The crimson Nels nearly toppled off his chair at the simplicity of the solution. He'd even had visions of violence and bitter recrimination when the nagging problem became known. But if the problem had ended, all the confusion didn't immediately disappear.

There is a quirk in man that causes him to anticipate the children of his offspring more keenly than he did his own. Nels could not understand his new father-in-law's joy over the coming event. So, Jens became a grandfather before Nels became a father. And eventually life was given to seven fine children.

The good humored Dane got the neighbors he had longed for.

Many years later, Nels would look through a small window as his two oldest boys were leaving with fresh butter for the lumber camp. He would think back to a sign in a Duluth labor hall that said, among other things, "No bad habits."

Among The Lumberjacks

Nearly overcome by the excitement and wonder of it all, the two boys sat quietly on the edge of a bunk. How sweet was a life that contained happenings like this. This was their first winter of delivering butter and the second time a kindly lumberjack had invited them to stop at the bunkhouse and sit for a while.

"Yessir, I was at Camp Four two winters ago," a round-faced Finnish youth said.

"How come you ain't back there?"

"Cause that Bull o' the Woods over there's got bees in his bonnet, that's why."

"What took place?" the ex-Missourian inquired.

"He's that geezer you might o' heard people tell of. The one that sez no man leaves his camp alone but has got to have a travelin' partner. It was about sun-up, and Crockett had his team outa the barn maybe five minutes late. That made twice he was late in one week – so the Bull o' the Woods told him to put 'em back in the barn. He was all done."

"Nothin' wrong with that."

"'Course not – I ain't finished. 'Bout that time I had to go to the barn boss for a collar strap. I was the first one hitched up and ready to go. I come outa the barn with my strap and the Bull sees me. He hollers out to me, 'You're canned too. Barn Boss'll put your team in. Now get your time and get to hell outa here!' I sez what'd I do? He sez, 'Nothin', but Crockett's leavin,' an I don't wanna see him walk outa here alone.'"

"Hell, you diden lose nothin', the Scotchman's got a better camp ennyhow."

In one end of the shed-like building, two of the older Jacks sat patching socks. The flickering lamp compelled them to concentrate on the task. The younger men, being the most talkative, were carrying the bulk of the conversation. A lumberjack grew less articulate with age and could store up talk for long periods of time, but when the Spring drunk loosened the dike, he would talk and sing until his voice became a mere rasp.

"What's your handle, Jack?"

The query was shot in the direction of the younger boy. Everyone was Jack to the old timbermen until proven otherwise.

"My name is Peter Dahl," the youth replied respectfully.

Peter was the fourteen-year-old. He was nimble of both wit and foot, and had little shyness that characterized his older brother, Oscar. While he was not bold or offensive, he had a certain frankness that seemed to come out with a grin making him easy to like. He was the spokesman for the brother team. When a question was asked of the boys, both he and Oscar unconsciously knew who would reply.

Peter was stocky of build, and his hair black as the feathers on a crow. He had a typically Scandinavian pug nose and, while a stranger would not call him handsome, he would be more likely to describe him as "pleasant looking." A useful way of describing Peter would be to reveal that each of his schoolmarms considered him as her "Pet."

Oscar, sandy-haired and bigger of frame than his brother, was not an unpleasant lad. When he was five years old, his mother assigned him the task of looking after the mischievous Peter. He never fully outlived his original responsibility. Although he was very quiet, he would at times chatter to Peter like a magpie. When boyish deliberation had brought him to a conclusion, he would tell Peter all about it. Peter, and Peter alone, was ever to hear him speak with much eloquence. Oscar had the square Norwegian jaw that was visibly set when his inherent tenacity was aroused. And it was common knowledge among the youngsters at the one-room schoolhouse that to harm Peter, you would first have to kill Oscar.

Conversation droned on among the lumberjacks. The younger of the group considered the older members to be grouches. And the old-timers were secretly a little disgusted with a younger generation that could not hold their tongues – blatting away like a band of sheep.

"I mind one spring on a drive down the Sturgeon River when I had my shoes on so long at a stretch that they growed to my feet. An' when I got drunk that spring, I legged it clear over to Crookston. An' two days behind me here comes my partner, Mike. He wuz follerin' me by scent."

A sample of lumber camp storytelling humor. Peter was doubled over with laughter, and even Oscar had to snicker.

"Out in Dakotie las' summer I saw somethin' amused me. This Farmer John I was wurkin' for had a coupla boys. They wuz all roundheads. Now the mailbox wuz a long ways from the house, an' the ol' man was expectin' an important letter about a mortgage or sumthin'. When he saw the mailman's team going pas' the box he sez to this kid, 'Get the pony an' ride afer the mail.' This kid done like his Pa tol' 'im. After the kid reached the

mailbox, he got offa the pony an' came walkin' back with the mail real slow. The ol' man was anxious for that mail. So, he stood there cussin' in the barn door about ten minutes before the kid got back. Ol' man grabbed the letter outa the kid's hand and sez, 'You got bats in your belfry?' The kid sez, 'No, Pa, you tol' me to ride after the mail. But you didn't say to ride back."

Peter's active young mind closed over this story like a trap. Many weeks later he repeated it to a friend word for word. Here was a life a man could really sink his teeth into. To the young Dahl brothers, the lumberjack took on a hue of almost unbelievable gallantry. Never were youngsters more fascinated, not even forty years later at a Madison Square Garden Rodeo.

There were so many eccentrics among lumber workers on that day that it took an extremely unusual action to attract notice. So, although the brothers gawked, the hum of life continued as Isaac entered the door of the bunkhouse. He carried a pitchfork in one hand, and a lantern in the other. When he had blown out the smelly lantern, he went to his bunk and tossed the heavy horse blanket on the rough-hewn floor. Isaac then proceeded to shake and mangle the hay that served as his mattress. By now the Dahl brothers had eyes for nothing else. Upon completing the process, Isaac's next task was to stand the pitchfork in a corner. The fact that he had noticed the puzzled boys caused Isaac's evening chore to be a little more thorough than usual. Since he also had been a country boy, he knew that no inquiry would be forthcoming, so he picked the correct dramatic moment to announce, "Ya! Get them bed bugs shook up good – or they wind up in your hind end and it takes a day before you can get rid of em."

Now here was a man, Peter silently concluded, that knew what he was about. Isaac's preparation told the lads that their highly educational visit was nearly over.

Country folk had a mysterious intuition as to when a visit was best concluded. This unlisted sense seems more remarkable when it is known that a visit might last from fifteen minutes to five days.

The boys were fidgeting a little and mentally checking on their heavy winter clothes when yet another ritual was bared to them.

It was a rarity to see a lumberjack smoking. Practically all of them used tobacco, but since they spent most of their working lives among hay-filled barns and dry timber, they took their tobacco in chewing form. Part of the process of closing the day was to take a hearty chew of finely ground snuff or Peerless fine cut tobacco. Since a lumberjack hardly ever spit, what happened to the resulting saliva remains a mystery even today.

It was a courtesy of the day when the lads' host reached into his packsack and inquired of the boys, "Peerless or snuff? I got both."

Here was an unexpected crisis.

Oscar looked at their benefactor blankly. Peter, inwardly fighting for poise in the face of this development, hesitated.

Finally, a decision had to be reached. "I'll thank you for a chew of Peerless," Peter stated.

The lumberjack handed Peter the yellow paper container and, since he was still observing, Peter felt it imperative to grab a substantial amount.

Oscar's reaction was still bewilderment.

He was waiting for a sign from Peter. A very slight nod indicated the course Oscar was to take. He gravely repeated the action of his brother.

Because an older, and yet silent, lumberjack evidenced an interest in the boys, they were detained for twenty minutes before their departure. This Jack had been a farmer, and he was interested in the quality of the hay the Dahls had put up. He asked about the current productivity of the milk cows. Their discussion concluded, the brothers softly thanked their host, and wished everyone a pleasant good night. They were tapped on the arms and extended an open invitation to return at any convenience.

The man on the moon, a timeless observer of strange things, must have grinned as he looked down at Northern Minnesota that night. Both boys were ill. Neither wanted to admit that fact to himself, or to his brother. Neither wanted to discharge the cause of the illness in the presence of the other.

It was a groaning Peter who cracked first. Oscar had his grandfather's stubbornness, plus a little of his own, but Peter's surrender hastened his.

"Good thing Pa don't know about this," murmured the subdued Peter.

But as is often true of the problems of the young, Pa would have understood.

Several days after the visit, the boys were in the woods behind the log barn. They were falling and bucking wood for the house. Boys of their kind became handy axmen – as the woodpile began when the family began – and was a continuing reflection of the fortunes and industry of the group.

"There just ain't nothin' could beat lumberjackin' for a job," Peter was informing his brother. He neither expected nor received an answer. "You reckon next fall we could ask Pa an' Ma about getting a job in a logging camp?" he continued.

Peter understood his brother and knew better than to press for an immediate answer.

The boys continued to work steadily throughout the short winter afternoon. Peter, as usual, commented on various things that hopped to mind. Oscar, whose thought process was thorough rather than rapid, remained noncommittal. On the way back to the log cabin, the answer came.

"Peter, you wanna go someplace, I'll go along. But next fall you'll still have a year of school left."

"You tell a fact, Oscar, but nex' fall is quite aways off, an' we got time to do some figurin'."

When the Christmas holidays were over and the boys went back to school, Peter thought he had the solution.

The Proposed Plan

School of that day was much less regulated than it is today. This was Oscar's second year in the eighth grade, so by ordinary odds that would finish his formal education.

Oscar was definitely not unintelligent – his handicap was the fact that he had been for several years the lad who tended the fire in winter and also the biggest boy in the one-room schoolhouse. To his schoolmarm, a rather frightened nineteen-year-old, he represented a certain measure of security. On the final day of school the previous year, Oscar brought home a note to his parents which read, "Oscar is a fine boy but needs another year in the eighth grade."

Nels and Teckla were a little puzzled by this note. Since it was useless to quiz Oscar as it was to chastise him, the parents called in Peter to help determine what the trouble was.

Peter, with his usual frankness, told his parents that the action was not an indication of a lack of study on Oscar's part. He added that since their schoolmarm had agreed to come back one more year, it was logical that she'd like to have Oscar around to help.

Nels was unable to support this bit of backwoods politics at first. But Teckla, filled with Danish kindness, went for it immediately. She stated in their broken language the problems that poor girl must have. From there, the situation went unjudged. It was neither good nor bad, it just was. And strangely, none of them stopped to consider how Oscar might feel about the matter.

Peter's role in the little schoolhouse was quite different from the one his brother filled. While it was Oscar who represented steady safety, it was Peter who brought about many of the schoolmarm's brighter moments. Born with an easy manner and good morale, he would charm the little structure when the children took turns telling anecdotes of the day. Since every class was conducted within hearing of other grades, Peter could do sixth grade work by the time he was in fourth. When he reached sixth grade, he had soaked up everything the system had to offer. Because of this, he was working silently on the plans for the coming autumn.

The schoolmarm, by an unusual stroke of good fortune, was of Italian extraction. It was standard practice of the day that the schoolmarm should be of the same nationality as was the surrounding community. This idea, originally born of necessity, caused accents and mannerisms peculiar to a given race to go unnoticed. And some Midwest educators are plagued with the results of it even today.

The Dahl brothers' teacher developed an important practical aptitude by an odd circumstance. Reared in a Mesabi Range mining town, she was able to afford only one year of normal school, then came teaching. As the Italian is not at the back of the line when it comes to mutilating our language, she became pronunciation conscious at a very early age. This was not a time when children were allowed to correct their parents. But in doing so, this little Italian girl became valuable to her family and the community, not despite her difference, but because of it.

The Italian in the Northland was seldom a farmer. That being true, the fluent little lady with only one year of normal school had to take the bottom of the list when the matter of placement came up.

Her language improvement campaign was temporary with many of her pupils. Although Peter began noticing that his parents seemed to acquire more accent as time went on. And later his grandparents' conversation began to sound like gibberish. But never did he make a comment.

Any good educator is a farmer who wants to plant seeds where they will grow. Peter's schoolmarm concentrated on removing his thick Scandinavian brogue and did a commendable job. When the late winter morning arrived to see her nauseated by "flu", she turned her duties over to Peter and went home.

Here was indeed a cause for student joy. Peter tried his best to follow the well-known schedule. Soon it was evident that bedlam was going to crowd out learning. The older pupils went through weird contortions that eventually caused the alarmed little ones to cry. Just as order was flying out the window, Oscar came to the rescue. He clapped his big hands together and a sound like a pistol shot brought immediate silence. "Hold your tongues," he said decisively. "Peter is boss today."

No further argument followed.

Although it seemed somewhat strange that a seventh-grader should be conducting eighth-grade classes, no one in the little room cared to dispute the issue with Oscar.

Peter's plan for an early graduation was an excellent calculation. He told his schoolmarm in confidence of his hopes for the coming fall of getting a job in a logging camp. When she saw the yearning in him, she bypassed regulation, and gave him the final exam for both seventh and eighth grade on the same spring afternoon. And the little princess from the Mesabi Range carried both exam papers in her handbag for over a year. Just in case any argument should arise.

When the boys traipsed home through the woods on the final day of school, they were joyous in the knowledge that one obstacle was licked. Teckla chided Nels when the parents learned that both boys had finished school.

"You see now," she said in their private language, "it would have been wrong not to let Oscar go to eighth grade twice." Nels was silent.

"The boys are always together," she pointed out with women's logic, "and now Peter got the year that Oscar gave up."

There was no answer.

Summer brought its usual hard work, but the plan was not forgotten. Oscar, impressed by the good fortune in getting school out of the way, developed more interest. Although he didn't find it easy to talk, he was more responsive whenever Peter would bring up the matter.

There remained the last obstacle, though – getting parental consent to begin their logging careers. The boys had grown up with respect for people and did not care to ignore the wishes of their parents. The lads talked it over often and finally Oscar said it was no use to talk about it anymore. He told his brother to bring up the matter to Pa and Ma whenever he thought the time was right. And he would go along with whatever decision was reached.

Peter waited until the rush of summer work was completed and the woodpile was high. Then he couldn't afford to delay anymore.

When he told Pa and Ma of the proposed plan to join the Fitzgerald logging outfit, they were thoughtful and said they'd talk it over among themselves and see how it looked.

Peter was overjoyed. The request must not have been too unreasonable, or he would have gotten a flat "no."

The very next day, however, powerful opposition developed from an unexpected quarter – Grandpa Jens Hansen.

This was something Peter had not even considered. His Grandpa had been one of his closest friends. The boys tried to reason out how a pal like Grandpa Hansen could turn on them. It seemed like a problem without an answer. And what was even more disastrous, it began to look like Ma was going to line up with Grandpa.

The problem was tossed around for several of the fine early autumn days. When the children were all outside in the evening, debate would go on in the mixed-up combination language. After the initial smoke of battle cleared, Grandpa was opposed. Grandma was silent. Teckla wavering, and Nels, at first doubtful, now positively in favor.

When Grandpa got the floor, he stated that he held plenty of timber land. He would give it to the boys and throw in some equipment. If they had to go out cutting wood, they could do it on their own land.

Nels was not a man devoid of conviction. He told the assembly that those boys were not only Jens Hansen's grandsons and his own sons, but in a way they belonged to themselves. He said when he was a kid in the old country, many of his people were not glad to see him go to America. But they did not stop him. He pointed a forefinger at the bristling grandfather Jens, and said,

"I'll tell you how my grandfather acted. I was his favorite, yet he helped me get lined up for the trip, knowing all the time that he'd never see me again. The last thing I saw in the old country was my white-haired grandfather standing on a rock in the fjord where the boat picked me up. He was crying his heart out."

Teckla wavered no longer. She said, "This is a lot of fuss to be making about a place you can walk to in three-quarters of an hour."

The decision was reached. The boys broke out in grins. Teckla occasionally had to dab at her eyes with her apron for several days, but inwardly she knew she had been right in supporting Nels.

And then a surprising thing happened. Grandpa Hansen got to mulling the whole thing over in his mind and concluded that he had been wrong. That, for a Dane, was not an ordinary accomplishment. It was arrived at secretly, of course. To think you have been wrong is bad enough, but to verbally admit it is sheer tragedy.

A rascal does not change his ways just because he's getting old. When the woodland grapevine told him there was some activity seen at the Fitzgerald Lumber Camp, Grandpa decided to pull a few cards out of his own sleeve. Upon being assured that the foreman, usually referred to in that day as "The Bull o' the Woods," was in camp on a preliminary work survey, Grandpa began perfecting his scheme.

Old Jens knew several things about "public relations" even back in that day. First, no lumber operator wanted to work his project in an area of hostility if it could be avoided, hence he was considerate of his farmer neighbor. Second, any Bull o' the Woods is not final authority but had to be a disciple of the policies of his company. Third, Grandpa was in a strong position because he realized that number one and number two existed.

Thus, it was no accident that Grandpa and the Bull o' the Woods would meet in the forest. Grandpa identified himself and noticed an air of respect in the lumberman. In broken English he explained about his two magnificent grandsons. He admitted that the boys had been considering another camp, but said he strongly urged the Fitzgerald camp because he knew how well Fitzgerald and he had gotten along for years.

Now the Bull o' the Woods was not exactly the dummy of the woods, so he thought he caught the general idea. He couldn't afford to take a chance, in any event, and Grandpa was assured that his grandsons would be well-received.

Although they were completely ignorant of the fact, the Dahl brothers got "super seniority" many years before unionism came to the Northland.

Bunkhouse Number Four

The big sign, suspended so it hung about five feet above the top of the long table, said but a single word – "Silence."

Daybreak would not come for nearly an hour. The Dahl brothers sat side by each, and hardly dared move lest they be declared "out of order." This scene was identical with dozens enacted at the same hour in camps scattered throughout the North Woods.

A near tragedy had been averted on the previous evening when Nels gave Peter his own shaving mug, since the boy had none. Oscar had been given one by Grandpa Hansen quite a while ago. Without a shaving mug, what would a man do on Saturday night?

The boys were alarmed when they happened to realize that in all their preparations, they had ignored the possibility that they might not get a job. Grandpa Hansen, who surely accepted defeat well, had been sure they would make out. With a first world war raging in Europe – and America now in it – he said everyone would have to put a shoulder to the wheel.

The morning's only noticeable sound was the clank of knife, fork and spoon. This certainly was a strange new custom. At home, everyone had been somewhat silent while he worked, but full of talk while at the table. The lumberjack had reversed this procedure. He talked while he worked but uttered hardly a sound at mealtime.

And so ended the first adventure of the day, and the boys followed their shack mates back to the bunk house for a chew and final preparation.

In a few minutes the Bull o' the Woods came through the row of bunkhouses and opened each door, a signal that the workday had begun. To the boys he issued short commands. He pointed to a veteran Jack and said to Peter, "Go with him." Oscar was likewise assigned a seasoned partner. This was serious business. For the sum of twenty-six dollars a month and keep, a man had to step right out and hustle, and hustle they did. Each morning was a new challenge to the Dahl boys, who were paid like men and planned to act like men.

The work was not foreign to these sons of Nels Dahl. They had cut down many trees. Only now the felling and trimming was not haphazard, but orderly.

Throughout the day, the cry, "Timberrr" preceded a crash as a giant tree was quickly brought to earth. The lumberjack, who conformed to his own peculiar code, had remarkable freedom while he worked. There was a pride that would not allow him to hang back or try to avoid work. The unindustrious soon knew he was in the wrong environment and did not stay long.

The Bull o' the Woods made his presence felt but was not meddlesome. He was generally a master craftsman, and in that day a boss was usually a man who had stayed on his feet the longest when the going had been the roughest.

If there was anything a lumberjack admired more than a drink in the springtime, it would likely be a horse in the wintertime. Since the fallen timber had to be conveyed, the horse was the natural partner of the lumberjack, and horsemanship was more to be desired than almost anything.

It followed that the teamster would be paid several dollars more each month than the swamper. This clannish bank of professional horsemen was headed by a creature who with experience, understanding and luck had made a "barn boss."

As afternoon shadows lengthened in the forest, the leader of the Fitzgerald Lumber Camp stood by a tree and muttered to himself, "That kooky ol' Dane didn't have nothin' to fret about. These kids are gonna turn out fine."

The first time during the day the new lumberjacks – Peter and Oscar – thought of home was when a silent workmate passed them the butter. They had seen their Ma and younger sisters make it several days ago.

A night away from home was an extraordinary prospect, but being a man and having a job was practically intoxicating. There were still a few arrangements yet unmade. Peter spoke briefly to Oscar when they left the evening meal at the cook shack. They returned to the bunkhouse because they thought it might be considered the proper move in this unfamiliar social system. A lounging Jack was told politely by the boys they were going to step out for a minute.

Oscar would bring Peter to the makeshift camp commissary where, once again, he was confronted by a haunting problem – Peerless or snuff.

Oscar paled and thought to himself, "Not enough trouble for one day yet? Now we got this thing to go through again."

The proprietor of the little concession had not yet opened for evening's business, so the boys had an opportunity to reach a decision.

"Which shall we buy, Oscar?" Peter had asked.

Oscar had answered quicker than usual. No doubt the emergency hastened his reaction. "Neither one. Don't you remember that night we walked home from here?"

"But, Oscar, we're men now. We're not kids anymore."

"We ain't gonna be men if they catch us pukin' on the floor."

"Here's what we'll do – we'll take a real small one. Soon as they blow the lamp, we'll pull it outa our mouths, and toss it behind the bed."

"You sure it'll work?"

"It's gotta work. You an' me can't sit on our bunks like ducks when it comes chew takin' time."

Peter had never summoned more persuasion than it took to clinch this deal. Only because Oscar respected his younger brother's judgment would he finally agree.

When the proprietor arrived, they had decided on snuff. They had already tried Peerless.

Adjustment is not a tedious process to youth. In a few weeks the boys felt they belonged. During the early winter evenings, Peter began to tell an occasional story to his workmates. This was done humbly, as he realized his rookie status. Anyone was free to talk, and the only parliamentary rule was politeness.

Lumberjacks were a breed apart. Seldom did they talk intimately to one not of their own kind. Since the herd instinct was close-knit in them, an old timer would freely relate a personal experience that had occurred years ago, leaving out no detail even if it made him appear ridiculous. He knew no jibe would be forthcoming and that he would never again be reminded by a listener of his past folly.

Life was a sweet delicacy to these sons of Nels Dahl. One day Peter said softly to his brother, "An' jus' think, Oscar, only last spring we finished our education."

The war in Europe did not affect this remote area as much as did a later one. Some of the younger lumberjacks Peter and Oscar had seen the previous winter had departed to do battle with the Hun.

There was a noticeable change, though, in the Northland. Winter seemed to have a great deal more sickness in it. Many older people pondered the connection between war and sickness. Some, as children in Europe, had heard of "plague", and were secretly alarmed. Not a few lumberjacks believed sickness was an enemy concoction. And since he had few outside his clan he could call friend, it must follow that he also had few enemies. Through it all the lumberjack fared quite well.

The Yule season took on a new aspect for Peter and Oscar. This year, they discussed drawing a portion of their earnings from Mr. Fitzgerald and buying a few things at the commissary for their family. Christmas in the northern forest was traditionally more spiritual than material, but how could two men so blessed with good fortune help wanting to pass a little of it on?

But many a plan has its obstacle, and Oscar pointed out to his brother that the commissary contained only articles for grown men. Consequently, only Pa and Grandpa Hansen would receive gifts. This was good reasoning, concluded Peter.

They did have a problem which they talked about for several days. It was Peter who came up with an idea.

"Maybe we should ask the boys in the bunkhouse some night."

"They'd think it was a silly question," replied Oscar.

"Nobody can figure he's gonna know everything, Oscar, and we ain't got an answer, so it's almost got to come from someone else," was Peter's interpretation.

"Try it if you want to, Peter, but I could never do it. I'd feel too foolish."

That same evening, Oscar was to be surprised at how correctly Peter had calculated the situation.

When a strategic moment arrived in the intermittent talk, Peter quietly asked the group in general if there was a way his brother and he could provide gifts for the younger kids at Christmas. A hush followed, and he was apprehensive lest he had been out of order, but he soon learned he had not.

"I mind the winter o' eighty-seven," a grizzled old Jack said, rolling out of his bunk. This man deserved attention, as he was one of the quiet old-timers, and sometimes went for a week without uttering a word.

"I was loggin' up in Maine. There was a small farmer drivin' team with us that winter. This chappie had a coupla kids back on the farm whur his woman wuz takin' care o' things. He had even a tougher sityeashun, 'cause them days there weren't near as much money or things as thur is now. An' town wuz a long ways off. Know what he done?"

He stopped and reached over in his packsack for a chew of snuff, his outburst surprising even himself.

"That chappie had a spare suit a underwear in his pack, one hundred percent wool. What he done wuz this – he got out his sewin' kit an' made dolls fer them little girls a his'n. I set for over a month awatchin' him. He

clipped some forelock hair off'n a horse an' jammed it on them little doll heads with molasses. He sewed on buttons fer eyes 'n' mouth, and when he got done, you never saw a purttier little set o' dolls."

Reflective silence followed this speech. Just when it seemed the old gent was finished, he started up again.

"That's been about thirty year, but I hearken it well. Happen it suits you boys, we kin start' amakin' 'em to-morry night."

The community project had taken form.

It was the evening task of Fitzgerald Bunkhouse Number Four during the next several weeks.

Without Knowing Fatigue

After the joyous holiday season, the snow began to pile deeper and deeper. Several times Nels had brought butter to the camp, and the boys knew just about when his next visit was due.

A cold, blustery March was well along when they became worried. The following Sunday they struck out for home and found that their father and several of the smaller children were sick. Peter told his mother that he and Oscar could probably get permission to come home and take care of the work if she needed them. She replied that if worse came to worst, she could send for them.

And it developed that she did, although she had told herself it wouldn't happen. The boys had no difficulty in getting released because it was later in the season, only a week before spring break-up.

Teckla had a husband and three children in bed with flu, so she was cleaning out the barn one morning when she looked up and saw her aged father coming slowly across the pasture.

When he reached her, he peered sharply for a moment and was silent while he regained his breath.

"How is Man?" he asked.

Teckla had to guess at what he said. During the past winter he had been prone to daydream parts of his speech and utter the remainder. So, he might well leave out some developing points and ask a question that seemed almost unintelligent.

"Nels is in bed but seems to be getting strong."

Since old Jens Hansen had begun speaking pure Danish and not the combination language, she answered in his tongue.

"I came to say I am going after boys tomorrow."

"What boys?" Teckla asked, not sure if she was getting sense or only parts of it.

"What boys," he snorted. "I'm going after my boy and Oscar."

Teckla was confused. She didn't know that Jens had considered Peter to be his boy. Age had finally peeled off the skin of inhibition, and he had reverted to the basic honesty of a child. And dream had become fact.

"We can get along without the boys," Teckla replied, not sure she was on firm ground.

"Daughter, this head is well worn, but not quite broke down yet, and tomorrow I go for the boys."

"But why, Papa?"

"Because spring break-up be soon. Maybe some time I go away. I am not going to lie in my bed waiting for The Old One with my boy dead drunk in a saloon with lumberjacks. He's too young."

Teckla was sniffling and wiped her eyes with the sleeves of the oversize jacket.

"Hold your tongue, Daughter. I have more to say."

Respect and habit caused Teckla to do as her rugged old father said.

"See to your Mama. Money is in hollow leg of table. Farm and everything legal belong to your man for nearly year now."

This was information that not even the ailing Nels knew about. Teckla stood motionless.

"There be plenty to do around here. Tomorrow, I go to boys and say, "Your Mama need you."

The wily old Dane, bolstered by a half century of strategy to guide these final years, figured he still couldn't be sure to outwit The Old One. It could at this moment be called a stand-off.

Things usually went the way Jens had them scheduled. The same day a gang of boisterous lumberjacks arrived in a nearby town, Peter and Oscar Dahl were burying their grandfather.

And three and a half months later, Mama was still worried as to how he was getting along, so she joined him.

The boys had left everything in good shape at home. Their two older sisters were now able to do the milking. They had a brother of twelve who had become a sort of working partner to Pa. The two farms had been consolidated now that Grandpa and Grandma were gone. Grandpa's barn was now a hay shed, and Grandma's house was occupied by a jolly French-Canadian family who trapped fur for a living. And the woodpile at home had risen to a new height.

The first tree at the Fitzgerald Lumber Camp to touch ground in the 1918 season was put there by Peter Dahl.

And Oscar, whose entire life was marked with a fondness for animals, had risen quickly to the rank of teamster.

Over half of the younger lumberjacks had gone to the war. The Dahl brothers had an Army career nearly in sight when a company timekeeper came into camp and broke an iron-clad rule. He burst in the door and shouted that an armistice had been signed – while the crew was eating supper.

Due to the war-created scarcity of men, the Fitzgerald Lumber Company was hiring even inexperienced men. The Bull o' the Woods now considered Peter a top-notch woodsman, and it was no surprise when the lad was given a rookie to break in. This prospect, Tom Wood by name, said he'd recently been released from an Illinois training camp after a very short military stint.

Tom was awkward with his hands. Peter liked him and therefore worked even harder than usual so the two-man output of work would not fall below usual requirements.

A lumberjack does not believe in prying, so the circumstances that brought Tom to a lumber camp came only when the rookie grew friendly enough with Peter to warrant personal conversation.

"Pete, do you think of yourself as a lumberjack?" the new partner inquired one morning.

"I don't know exactly what I am," was the answer.

"What I am about to say is not intended as a personal reflection, Pete," the partner explained. "But to me, the lumberjack is a human phenomena, and I can't for the life of me understand how American psychologists bypassed him and traveled to far away jungle tribes to study human behavior."

This was bordering on too rich for Peter, although he had been studying. During the workday many ideas had come up for discussion. Peter had often been left behind due to the limitation of his vocabulary, and one day he said to Tom, "Could you talk a little more simple?"

Tom replied, "No sir, Pete, I will not. I'm sure your native intelligence is as high as mine. If any word I utter stymies you, look it up."

"Look it up," Peter had been doing. He knew his former schoolhouse had two dictionaries, so he asked his oldest sister to borrow one for him. The lumberjacks, who were not easy to startle, did find it odd that Pete would lie on his bunk studying a dictionary, but no comment was made.

Peter, who had been confident he could connive his way out of school a year early, put that confidence to a new test. He decided to improve his speech and reading abilities. The extra effort he had put forth to be sure Tom did not lose his job was to be returned immeasurably.

"What is there in a lumberjack that makes you call him a phen, phen, phenomena?" Peter asked.

"The extreme opposites in him are observable," Tom replied. "I don't understand what activates the lumberjack. I realize there's good and bad in each of us, and often the only difference between a good person and a bad person is a set of circumstances that creates the impression. Now take the lumberjack, he's almost miserly in winter, but when spring comes, he has a period of insane generosity. I doubt there is a more efficient workman on the face of the earth. Yet he handles leisure time worse than anyone I know. He's among the most tolerant of people but has bitter scorn for anyone who talks during a meal, or after the lamp has been blown out at night. How does this all impress you, Pete?"

"If you don't know, I'm sure I don't. But now I have more work for tonight."

"What's that?"

"Motivate and phenomena," the learner declared.

Peter was to look back later and call this winter one of his best. Oscar, wearing his new teamster laurels gracefully, would have had to concur.

Some of the ex-soldiers drifted back to camp with stories of travel. None of the overseas troopers showed up at Fitzgerald's that winter.

Peter and Tom Wood were now recognized as partners. While Peter coached Tom in woodcraft and the work-a-day world, Tom coached Peter's active mind. The arrangement worked nicely, since man seldom desires his partner to exceed him in everything.

One day Tom asked, "Pete, why is it you've never asked me what circumstance brought me to a lumber camp?"

Peter replied, "If you want me to know, you'll tell me. If you don't, my askin' wouldn't likely be of any use."

"Pete, once I tried to be generous and say you were as smart as I. I didn't mean that. Now I do mean it, and I believe your intellect exceeds mine. And you worked like a devil so I wouldn't lose my job. You didn't owe me anything, but you did it out of human kindness. We're learning from each other."

This was not a winter of half-hearted work. Peter and Oscar, who had been raised in the forest, were able to work from sunrise – without knowing fatigue – until they heard the Bull o' the Woods shout in the evening. Each day they looked forward to an interesting evening.

They seldom had a dull one.

8

Benefit by Travel

In camp that winter they had a few new faces. One chap, known to all because of aggressive talk, claimed to be the only man in camp who was a card-carrying I.W.W. labor union member. His name was Cappy, and his origin was unknown. Impromptu debate often matched Cappy and Tom Wood.

Cappy held that labor and capital were separate and opposed forces. The world would not rest until capital had been crushed. Most of the nation's evil was instituted by the Chase National Bank and the Wall Street Journal, and along those and similar lines lay Cappy's reasoning.

Tom, who had a more extensive storehouse of theory at his command, held a contradictory view. He maintained that the closer labor and capital became entwined, the sooner we would become a great nation. His analysis was that when financier, producer, and consumer are all thrown together in the single individual, we can't miss as a nation.

To this opinion, Cappy countered with vague dissertations on world trade and world money markets. He could have slid this past many of the watchful lumberjacks, but often it happened that he was saved by the light. The senior lumberjack in the bunkhouse kept a close check on his big, gold-plated watch, and when time came for lights out, that was absolutely all for the evening. And if a lumberjack, by whimsical fate, could have defied laws of nature and started giving birth to a baby, those lamps would still have been blown out on schedule.

From conversations with Tom and various ex-soldiers, Peter had begun to speculate on the outside world. The states and locations mentioned had previously been only vague areas out of a geography book. He was consumed with curiosity to see a country that would be sparse of trees.

One day Tom soberly addressed his partner, "Pete, from all I hear, it won't be but a few days until we'll have this season finished."

"It looks like it by the weather," was the reply. Peter could have added that it also felt like it. He'd been boiling with anticipation for a new adventure for several weeks.

"I suppose we'll get separated in this break-up."

"That I don't know," Peter responded.

"In case we don't see one another again, I'm going to tell you how I happened to come to the woods. Might be boring to you, though."

"I haven't been bored yet this winter. Isn't likely to happen now," was Peter's observation.

"Consider it your graduation exercise or, better yet, just a talk between two friends. Anyhow, I'm not an escaped con or a fugitive from justice, I'm a fugitive from a social system. Might as well start at the beginning.

"My mother and father live in a big Midwest city. I also have an older brother and three younger sisters. My father and my brother are both attorneys, and I came within a year of also becoming one. I became involved in a silly scrape at college, and the argument that followed put me on the road. And I believe I'll always be thankful for that ridiculous argument.

"When I was a kid, visitors would sometimes ask, 'What are you going to be when you grow up?' Before I had a chance to answer, one of my parents would say, 'Oh, James and Thomas are both going to be lawyers.' It was sort of 'Create in Thine Own Image' school of thought. Any friend I had would need to be checked for social and financial position before he could come to the house. I heard 'lawyer' so damn much that it sickened me even before I went to college. I'm not saying all of this was wrong. It was only wrong for me. My brother seemed to do all right under almost identical circumstances.

"Now, why didn't I revolt earlier? Any child is born with a certain amount of love for the 'parent image'. For many years I didn't know the setup was wrong. I figured it was me.

"My father would rave about some case in court, and I'd get to wondering, 'How could his opponent be that wrong?' And likewise, I'd think, 'How can anyone be right as consistently as father?' When he was wrangling in court to prove this or that, I was curious about how those people got into court in the first place. When I started to grow up, I knew I didn't want to be an attorney. I wanted to be a sociologist.

"I've laughed several times about the way that proposal was received by my folks. You'd think I'd asked permission to chop down the Statue of Liberty. My mother said, 'I don't know of a single one of those in the Social Register.' My father roared like a bull and said, 'Get your feet on the ground, boy. Those chaps are all long-haired dreamers.' And, he said, 'you go right ahead with law. You'll get over that silly notion in time.'

"At that point, I didn't know which way was up. When I got out on the road, it was as if my eyes had shed a layer of skin. In a year or two, after I'd knocked around with the so-called lower strata of society, I could think it over and see what was cockeyed. I'm enjoying life now. I'm doing what I want to do. I'm free of false binding social restrictions, yet I'm noting that I'm more kindly with people all the time. Not just selected people, but all people. And I'd damn sight rather be a happy hobo than a frustrated lawyer."

"With this background, you're probably curious about why I'm here. Having traveled the Dakotas and Iowa for several years now, I keep meeting lumberjacks. I kept asking myself, 'Wood, what makes those fellows tick?' I finally got so curious I came up here to work. I have no obligations, outside myself. When something interests me, I look it over."

Peter's curiosity compelled him to break in. "Was the argument so serious that it can never be patched up?"

"I don't think any argument is. This incident was just the breaking point. My mother cried and said, 'Oh, what will people think?' My dad was roaring as usual. 'We've got enough money to keep this thing quiet.' No one was concerned with the action, only the reaction. Hell, this thing was brewing for fifteen years. I'm only lucky it happened when it did. I'm not going to be bull-headed. I'll go back some day. May even finish school, but it won't be law. Right now, I have another project in mind."

Peter asked, "What project?"

"I'm sure it would sound loony to you," replied Tom.

"I won't laugh, no matter what."

"When I was a boy, I read a good deal about the Plains Indians. When I look at it from a mature angle, it strikes me that he had a remarkable society. His way of life had to cease in favor of what we like to call progress. This summer I'm going to work my way out to the Dakotas and see if I can get a word-of-mouth description from some old chief about what actually happened out there."

"It sounds interesting," offered Peter.

"You're invited to come along if you want to."

"How about my brother?"

"Certainly, there's plenty of room on a boxcar."

And so came the early form of a plan where none previously existed.

Though Peter and Oscar no longer worked in close proximity, they had by no means lost contact, and Peter felt he should soon get Oscar's reaction to the idea of a forthcoming trip.

Oscar, he reasoned, might not be easy to convince on the advantages of travel. The new teamster had an opportunity to learn from the best in the profession, and he was enjoying it. But no harm could come out of

discussing it. At his first opportunity, Peter told Oscar of his thoughts, shared in adventurous terms that Peter often deployed.

"I dunno, Peter," was the first answer. "To tell a fact, I wasn't anxious to come to the lumber camp when we did, but it turned out all right. Now we're chasing Tom's interest in Indian life? Why don't he go over to Nett Lake?" was his response. Oscar, always of practical mind, had some difficulty gleaning any sense out of the proposal.

"Oscar, it isn't exactly a wild goose chase. We're gonna work. It'll only be a few months and you'll be back with your horses again. I know you're happy skinnin' team, and I'm not saying we should quit the camp. I was just thinkin' about after camp's break-up. That is, if Pa don't need us an' says it's all right."

Discussion went on for more than half an hour. Finally, Oscar said he was game and didn't exactly favor the idea, but someone had to look after these two crackpots. Both agreed that they'd have to check on the situation at home.

Break-up time was fast approaching. A certain tension nurtured by hard work and monotony seemed to be increasing in the crew. Two usually polite lumberjacks got in an argument in the horse barn and were stopped from swinging fists only by their co-workers.

Tom had not slowed down on the campaign to polish his partner. Peter had by now shown Tom every trick he could think of in making the day and production easier. The Bull o' the Woods congratulated himself on the good judgment that caused him to assign this recruit to young Dahl.

The boys would make a weekend trip home to visit the family and seek approval for their trip with Tom. Seeing Oscar and Peter for the first time since Grandpa Hansen's funeral, Nels and Teckla commented on the change in their sons. Kids certainly grow up fast, they decided. Everything was going smoothly on the Dahl farm. During the short winter afternoon, it was concluded that the boys might benefit by travel, provided they kept their wits about them. Nels, of course, furnished this last view.

To Teckla, travel was a foolish thing. Everything that a person could need or want was right there within reach. One point not easily overlooked was the fact that Nels was right in allowing the boys to go to work for Fitzgerald in the first place. Anyone could see they were becoming fine men.

She reasoned it all out, step by step, and decided it would be wise to agree with Nels.

South to Iowa

Back in the logging woods, all travel plans were temporarily forgotten in the rush to successfully close the camp and get to town. When the spring orgy broke loose, Peter and Oscar were amazed at what happened to their placid workmates. Old timers who had hardly spoken all winter were chattering like spring birds.

A man who had patched his trousers so that hardly any of the original material was apparent, boomed out, "Timberrr." In the woods this signaled a falling tree, but in a saloon it meant drinks for all at the expense of the caller. This man had gone without a five-dollar pair of good wool trousers, and the first drink cost him twenty.

An old horseman had cornered Oscar in the saloon fearing they might both disappear and proceeded to tell him all the things that had not readily come to mind during winter.

In the melee, a giant lumberjack hoisted Peter to the top of the bar and announced, "In five years this fella will be the top axeman in the nort' woods."

Cappy, anti-capital convictions growing with each drink, decided he was going to give Tom a much-deserved licking. He was cuffed by a nearby lumberjack who said, "We don' want no trouble here." Battle lines were quickly drawn and the skirmish to ensure peace lasted almost a half hour.

Since no man was a lumberjack until he had cried "Timberrr" in a saloon, and no lumberjack was a man until that had occurred, Peter, Oscar and Tom each bought a round of drinks.

The barkeep, reaping his best harvest of the year, had thoughtfully hired a fiddle player for the occasion. The fiddle player grossed one hundred dollars the first day. This had to be divided with the barkeep. A previously tightfisted Jack who was paid thirty dollars a month would gladly toss ten dollars in the hat so the boys could dance a little longer.

During the second day, Peter, Oscar and Tom stumbled out of the saloon in a state of exhaustion. A new wave had joined their own campmates. The reinforcements came from a camp a few miles east of the Fitzgerald camp. Some of the Fitzgerald men were already out of funds and greeted the latecomers with unbounded affection.

When the three young fellows awoke in a boxcar several miles down the track from the saloon, Peter made a wry face and said, "I feel like I've been scalped already."

Tom groaned softly, "Funny what a fellow will do in the interest of science."

Oscar lay motionless, blinking his eyes, and said quietly, "Isn't it a shame we can't die?"

Conversation was difficult in the boxcar. Tom showed the brothers proper sitting posture for a trainhopper with his advice inserted between the rhythmic clacking of the track's rails.

"Everywhere we go things are different," Oscar mumbled to himself as the world moved by.

When the train came to rest for fuel and water at a remote station somewhere along the way south to Duluth from Minnesota's North Woods, the three crawled out of the boxcar to better observe the local scenery, sparse as it was. To the Dahl brothers there was much fascination. They had no idea that America contained so much flat land. Fields they had known were small and boundary lines had been determined by the progress of clearing brush. It seemed these fields went on endlessly.

Their first destination had been determined. It was to be Iowa. The rail lines from Minnesota ran straight south to Iowa, eliminating tricky connections. It was still a little too cold to move comfortably in the Northland. Besides, they were told by other hobos that Iowa was looking pretty good, and a man had a fair chance of getting a job pushing a wheelbarrow.

On their journey, they had eaten several meals at hobo "jungles." The brothers had been at a complete loss. Everyone jabbered and talked during the "cookin' up" and the consumption of the meal. A hobo jungle, explained Tom, existed on the outskirts of nearly every town. It had originally been selected for convenience, and any veteran hobo going through a town knew instinctively where the logical spot would be. All it consisted of was a well-trodden area with stones or scrap iron arranged to facilitate cooking. Seldom was one of these fireplaces elaborate, but all were functional. Most jungles had a few odd cooking utensils lying around, all dirty and soot blackened.

"Cookin' up" could be a small partnership or a group affair, depending upon the circumstance. Seldom was any food wasted. The "Bo" that had leftover food could always see one who didn't quite have enough.

At a jungle along the way, Tom continued to coach. "Always remember, Oscar, get on a moving car from the front end. If anything goes wrong or you miss the stair rung, you'll bounce off the car to safety. If you have a slip while trying to get on the back end, you're apt to land between the cars. And if you think the car is too fast, let it

go. What the hell is a half a day, more or less? Remember, one thing you've always got to watch for is don't get locked inside a car under any circumstance."

This was a possibility that hadn't occurred to the Dahl brothers. A hobo, like a lumberjack, has got to have his training, Oscar concluded silently.

Passing through Duluth had been confusing, because it had happened at night. The boys had only to follow Tom, and there had been little difficulty in changing trains. He told them that the Twin Cities would be a tougher proposition.

And it was. They approached the Twin Cities in the forenoon and the two new travelers were dumbfounded.

"I wonder how come everybody moved to the city all at once," Oscar wondered.

Peter said, "I'll bet there isn't room for another person here."

Tom had more traveling education to impart. "Above all, let's stick together. If we get in a jackpot, we'll do better as a trio than we will singly. I've been through the yards we're headed for, and the yard bull isn't too bad."

Now here was something else to speculate on, the brothers decided. What is this yard bull Tom was talking about?

Tom explained. "The yard bull is a railroad company policeman or detective, whichever the case may be. Since railroads have yard and switching trackage that would be too expensive to expect a municipality to protect, they have their own men for it. Protection policies vary widely, and the individuals charged with upholding policy vary even more widely."

This one, whose area they had to invade in changing trains, was judged as alright.

In days to come, much discussion on the road was centered on the yard bull. In most cases, the hobo who could move freely did so only with the good graces of the yard bull.

The relationship between traveler and law, however, sometimes bordered on the fantastic.

It was not unusual for an alert hobo to make it a point of honor to steal through a hated yard bull's domain by clinging to a passenger train to display his contempt. A wise and understanding yard bull might even become the father image to an admiring hobo, and the traveler not worried about destination might go several hundred miles out of his way just to see his yard bull friend and say hello.

After days of travel, the destination was upon them – Iowa. And a job was landed with an ease that amazed Peter and Oscar. A contractor was beginning the framing of a new schoolhouse in a small Iowa village. The three young men were directed to the flimsy shack that served as construction office and hired immediately.

The construction chief said later to a timekeeper, "Those lumberjacks might not stay for the whole job, but they'll work while they're here."

He was correct. The three lumberjacks were assigned to hauling brick, cement and other supplies from boxcars to the building site. Oscar drove the horses. Load after load was hauled on the flat-bottomed wagon. The experience was almost as thrilling as the first day in a lumber camp.

And to top it all off, they were staying at an honest-to-goodness hotel. A later day would have condemned this rambling shack as unsafe, unsanitary, unfit and "un" everything – and done so with justification. But to Peter and Oscar it was so unbelievable as to almost make sleeping a waste of time.

The hotel's fare was not appetizing, but it was ample. The lass who served the meals was thought by Peter to be the exact reverse. An unforgettable evening arrived when joking tablemates forced the blushing Peter to kiss this comely maid. That day had a popular expression that stated whoever took the last portion on a platter had to kiss the cook. Peter, of ravenous appetite, had committed this error unthinkingly several times. His construction gang friends had decided to put the legend into action.

Reflecting on it all later, Peter came to a conclusion. It was fun to kiss the cook. And the marvel of it all – after the first couple of seconds, she had hardly struggled.

Peter was really living. And, befitting a man of good fortune, he wrote a postcard to his parents to tell them he was in Iowa helping build a schoolhouse.

It might easily have occurred that Peter became a permanent Iowan, had it not been for several things. His partners were getting itchy. Tom was still in the notion of going west to talk to an Indian chief. Oscar wanted to go west also, but for a different reason. So long as they were out and around, he might as well see what a cowboy looked like.

Peter and Oscar were to gradually learn that boxcar travelers of the day fell into two loosely defined groups – hobos and tramps.

10

The Haying Season

The hobo could have originated from any walk of life. He intended to work enough to provide his meager needs. Many varied conditions could be responsible for creating a hobo, ranging from the spirit of adventure to the unwillingness to face life. The hobo often traveled in pairs and occasionally in groups up to ten or twelve in number. His opinion was often quite analytical, since travel and human contact prevented him from becoming dull.

Possibly the best description of a tramp would be to call him a hobo who had soured. The tramp did not use the grapevine that kept the hobo informed of his friends' whereabouts. He generally traveled alone. He did not consider himself a part of society and had separated himself from relative and friend. Although people and he had parted, he still thought people had the responsibility of feeding him. Circumstance can easily alter appearance, so it was amazing how these groups could so easily recognize one another.

The basic difference was that of outlook. And, somehow, outlook silently made itself known. It would have been difficult to insult a tramp. A hobo didn't mind being tabbed, but calling him a tramp was the grossest of insult.

The beginning of the haying season found the three prosperous travelers at the beginning of the high plains in South Dakota. The trip had been a leisurely one. In one little town they had noticed quite a few hobos. Peter, Oscar and Tom lingered in that jungle for a day and a half. Talk had been of conditions existing for hundreds of miles in any direction. One yard bull after another had been brought up for scrutiny. And a tiny bit was added to legend. The alarm was sounded that a good yard bull in a particular town had retired. In his place was a zealous young fellow. He was termed a "Bad One." None of them realized that within a week this information would be known in Illinois, Kansas and Wyoming.

In the tradition of hobos, while the three young men had money, they enjoyed it. They stayed in the jungle and soaked up the wonderful sunshine. It took several hours to decide what they would cook up for the next meal. This pleasant state was broken up by a gangling man in a big cream-colored hat. Peter, always alert, had said, "I'll bet this is a policeman coming."

He wasn't a policeman. He was a rancher, and he was looking for help to get up a bunch of hay while the weather was nice.

Haying was not new to the Dahl brothers, nor was it to Tom. But it seemed this rancher was going to put up all the hay in the civilized world. The cattle herd was many miles away in some rolling hills, so the boys never saw what was going to eat the hay. But they speculated.

Among the clutter of men at the hay ranch, Oscar saw his cowboy and Tom saw his Indian. Peter, with no sight to look for, wondered how his cook in Iowa was getting on.

On a Saturday evening, two weeks after the traveling lumberjacks had come to the ranch, Tom and the young Indian left together. In departing, Tom simply said he would meet the brothers in the same jungle they had been hired from. No mention of date or time. This puzzled Peter and Oscar, who felt lost without their instructions. They talked the situation over and decided to stay on at the ranch until the haying had been completed. They were reminded of the lumber camp by the good-natured joshing that went on in the bunkhouse. They listened to music from an unusual instrument. It was called a guitar.

Sunny days, filled with shouting activity, brought the haying season to an end. Peter and Oscar were paid off and returned to the jungle to see if Tom was there awaiting them.

The hobo kitchen was unoccupied. The boys spent several days in the tiny village, eating in the jungle and sleeping in the shelter of a nearby livestock shipping yard. Upon going to the jungle to cook up the morning meal on the fifth day, they saw a welcome sight. Tom was lying asleep on some scattered hay.

He was flat broke, sick and had been drinking. No questions were asked, and no information was volunteered. During the day a slow, idling conference between the three produced a decision. Their best bet would be to head east and north to get into cropland. They decided to go for a day or so and stop at another good jungle to pick up information on how everything was going around the country.

Several days and several hundred miles later, Tom told the Dahl brothers where he had been. The three of them were alone in a jungle shaded by willow trees. He talked slowly and carefully without interruption, with legs crossed politely.

"This kid and I kept heading west. He lived on a reservation. He told me he'd never seen a nut like me, but if I was sincere, he didn't see why he couldn't help me find out some of the things I wanted to know. Besides, he had enough money and was headed home.

"I stayed at a little village on the edge of the reservation, and in a day or so this kid came to town with his grandfather. The old man only lived a mile out of town and came in often.

"The Indian doesn't trust the white man yet, so it took a couple of days before I could get him talking. I nosed around and bought a jug. That helped get the conversation going. And in the end it nearly killed me. Since this Prohibition came in, you don't know what you're drinking anymore.

"I asked this old-timer if he ever thought the day would come when the Indian would be blended in with the white man so there would be no more Indian. You'd never guess what his answer was. He said, 'I hope not, because it looks like in ten or fifteen generations we might get our country back.'

"I began to think he was getting childish, but when I heard his reasoning, I dropped that option.

"He said, 'Looks like the same thing that beat us is going to beat the white man! And since we're living in isolated, valueless areas, we'll be the survivors and it'll be just like it was centuries ago.'

"Here's what he told me. 'My race passes history along by word of mouth. My father was at a place that is now Council Bluffs, Iowa, many years ago. The red man held council there. Over a hundred years ago we knew that if we didn't get straightened out, the white man was going to take our home. If the red man had not fought among himself, we would still have our land. The Indian could have stopped the westward movement if Sioux had not worried about fighting Crow. And Crow had not worried about Blackfoot. It was not often we could agree on a plan to save our home, so the white man chopped us down, one tribe at a time. My father told me that at the council each chief always had the number of his warriors and horses in the back of his mind when he spoke. And truly, he would rather lose his home than accept the council of his fellow chief. The white man had better weapons than we did. Yet many of these weapons came also into our hands. Only one thing beat us. The white man, by accident, was united in a desire to go west. We were not united and went in all directions.'

"Well, Pete and Oscar, it was quite a while before I could talk. And it wasn't only poor whiskey. When I got my breath again, I asked him, 'How do you liken this to the white man?'

"'The white man has had the Big War. Like our tribal wars, it settled nothing. Another one will come. It will also settle nothing. Rich now, after the Big War, the white man's chiefs at the council table count their warriors and horses in the back of their minds when they speak. If this continues, you will not have peace. We were beaten by a better weapon maker from other lands. Soon all weapon makers will be the same. There is no more strange land, and the white man will beat himself. He has bombs and gas with which to wipe himself out. When he does, the Indian in the remote region will have back his home. And time will never have missed the few centuries.'"

When Tom talked, it seemed natural to listen. This strange story had no equal, so far as Peter and Oscar were concerned. And it seemed no more discussion was appropriate, so they sat and pondered over it, saying nothing.

But a young fellow of the day will not sit long and think over the words of an old Indian.

The eleven o'clock freight didn't know it because it was dark, but it picked up three additional passengers.

In four days, they were in the heart of North Dakota wheat country. And Oscar had still required more coaching.

"If you see a man alone in a boxcar, don't ask him for information," Tom told him. "Chances are, he'll only growl. If he liked to talk to people, he wouldn't travel alone."

Here was real living. The jungle was in a grove of box elder trees. The crops had not fully ripened, so work was not considered. There was continuous traffic in and out of the jungle. Trade talk, gossip and speculation filled the jungle during evening sessions. A chap named Professor and Tom would get into lively discussions while the other men sat around listening.

"The farmer has no control over price," Professor would state, "and won't have, until he and labor can unite and sell the products as they see fit."

"Is the farmer concerned yet about price, or marketing trend, for that matter?" Tom asked. "Look," he continued, "around here a farmer will raise wheat, wheat and more wheat, regardless of the price of wheat or the price of any other small grain. When hog prices are high, the farmer says, 'I'm going to raise a lot of hogs. They're high.' Next year the market is oversupplied, and when the rush of hogs come in, they're low. So, the price is low, nobody wants to raise hogs. Next year, nobody has hogs, and the price is high. Now, whose fault is that?"

"What I'm talking about is this," pointed out the Professor. "If the supply can be held back, demand has got to sharpen."

And so the discussion went. The next evening would find a new subject. And if a farmer who was puzzled over hog prices had stumbled into one of the sessions, he would have learned something.

But then, anyone knows that a shiftless hobo "don't know nothin.'"

11

Possibility of Trouble

The next freight brought a fresh grapevine bulletin – 'They're cuttin' grain in the Red River Valley!'

A bedraggled "Bo" came out with an old saw, "Our money's low, so let's go." And the jungle, temporary home of liberal arts, was vacated.

But the travelers hit a snag. The next day they and many of their kind arrived in one of the principal North Dakota cities, Bismarck, on the main line in the south-central part of the state. Evening came and a westbound train with flat cars loaded with farm machinery had not pulled out on schedule. This, in turn, had delayed the eastbound train which was going to the Red River Valley. So, unticketed passengers of the two trains were visiting and exchanging views as the sun went down.

While twilight visibility was still fairly good, a flashlight came bobbing faintly along the cars. It was the yard bull, and he was angry. Within the past thirty-six hours, two freight cars had been broken into and rifled. He was under orders to clear out the yard. He opened the attack verbally.

The hobos were not angry, only impatient to get moving. While the yard bull thundered and waved his arms, a small circle of men formed around him. The circle grew tighter, and the yard bull grew more subdued. A medium built hard-faced man became undelegated spokesman.

"Look, Cocky, every man in here is goin' on either of these trains. When they leave, your yard'll be clean. Now act reasonable – we'll have no trouble, but we're going', and it'll be on these trains."

What the grim speaker didn't know was that the yard bull had considered the possibility of trouble. The local police department was on unofficial standby.

The yard bull was now trapped. And he was not foolish. He said, "All right, boys, these trains will be moving in twenty minutes. When they leave, I don't want a man left in the yard." He had planned it thus, but only wanted to influence anyone with intentions of lingering.

It was a good piece of negotiation, and everyone concerned was satisfied. Everyone except one man.

The yard bull had walked scarcely three car lengths away from the conference when a misguided, half-crazed tramp stepped from between two grain cars and whacked him over the head with a piece of pipe.

A switchman saw him fall and let out an alarmed, piercing yell.

Before the stunned hobos could get to the yard bull to see how badly he had been hurt, whistles were blowing, and searchlights were flashing all over the yard. In less than one minute the yard was clean.

Peter ran as fast as his legs would allow. He realized eventually that someone had ahold of his shirt tail. After forty yards he became fearful it was a policeman he was dragging along. When he finally fell exhausted on the ground, he gasped, "Who is it?"

"It's me, your brother," was the panting reply. Oscar was also frightened and exhausted.

The brothers stood regaining their breath and watched the commotion going on in the railroad yard from afar. They heard a sound nearby and a whispered decision came from Peter, "We better keep going."

They walked east for what seemed hours, discussing the sudden incident. Neither was sure if the yard bull had been killed by the angry blow.

What had happened to Tom?

In the early part of the dark walk, they had considered circling back to the jungle to look for Tom. Peter concluded, "If that yard bull was killed, they won't know who to blame. They'll grab anyone they can get their hands on."

The beginning of the day comes early in summer, and the brothers, convinced now they were in trouble, began looking for a place to hide during daylight hours. They decided to pull some hay out of the bottom of a stack and crawl into the hole that resulted, pulling the hay in after them. Full daylight came and Peter and Oscar were sleeping comfortably.

The sun, which had put the boys into their hideout, also brought them out of it. Before noon, the heat and close quarters had almost suffocated them. The misery of the situation dulled the acute sense of danger. Both lads were perspiring, dirty and terribly hungry. They decided to break off wheat stalks and nibble on the grain within reach of their haystack haven, and begin drifting north, avoiding the narrow day roads.

The wheat was not quite ripened, but it removed the parched feeling in their mouths. They came to a little depression in the gently rolling patchwork of grain fields and drank deeply of the warm, alkali-tasting water. By

avoiding farms, roads and any area that showed life or activity, they kept plodding north, gaining in both strength and spirit as evening approached.

Discussion of their fate started to increase. Distance had brought a measure of security, so Peter suggested they sleep during the night.

The resumption of flight the following morning brought speculation. This couldn't go on forever, Peter told his brother. The diet of pulpy, ripening grain, while preventing starvation, was only a stopgap at best. Both boys were so hungry they were becoming weak.

Within the hour, they progressed over a little hill and were met by a barking farm dog. Several hundred yards behind the exploring dog was a four-horse team and a mysterious-looking apparatus that seemed to have a man riding on it. Oscar petted the wiggling dog and looked up at his brother.

"If we run, he'll know something is wrong," Peter told him. "Sooner or later we gotta talk to somebody."

The apparatus was a grain binder. Chattering from it came to an abrupt halt when the meeting occurred. The four horses stood switching at flies while conversation was begun.

"What in thunder you fellas doin' way out here?"

"Looking for work," Peter answered. Decision had been quickly reached. It would hardly do to say they were fugitives.

"Well, I got a field of early oats down. You fellas wanta do some shockin', I might have some work."

The farmer, troubled with lack of help during the war, saw a chance to save himself the effort of going to town to locate men. Harvest was beginning. The bundled grain had to be stood up in clusters of eight to twelve of the twine-tied units. During the Big War, grain had not been shocked up in many instances. Thus, after a rain the bundle was slow to drip out and sometimes grew fast to the very ground that had produced it. Soggy grain was impossible to thresh out well. The kernels, never having been cured, could not be easily stored and would shrivel from the heat caused by unnatural curing.

Weeks of hard work and substantial food restored the usual high morale of the Dahl brothers. The kindly farmer was not talkative – his wife took care of needed conversation. Oscar drove the binder the last couple of days of harvest. The North Dakota farmer showed him the mechanism of the intricate thing and then shocked grain with Peter.

The incident that brought Peter and Oscar to the farm was almost forgotten.

There remained, however, one big question – what had happened to Tom Wood.

The brothers, quite naturally, began to associate North Dakota with the kind treatment they were receiving. The farmer told them a man could often get employment for the entire crop season on a farm. The boys concluded that while hoboing was fun and sometimes necessary, a man couldn't make a living on the fact that he could catch a fast car.

This farmer needed only occasional help except for the harvest, so no arrangement for a steady job was possible with him. But being young and having known few farmers, they judged the herd by the critter, and decided any North Dakota farm would be a pretty good bet for next year.

When the cold weather and the completion of threshing put the boys on the move once again, they traveled by boxcar. This was hardly necessary, as each of them had several months' earnings in his pocket. But it was the only method of travel they were familiar with. And it never occurred to them to go to a restaurant, so they stood in chilly jungles along the way east and cooked up.

On the bridge over the Red River of the North that is also the state line of North Dakota and Minnesota, the boys finally got a grapevine report of Tom. He was last seen in the Bowery district in Chicago. Their informer said, "He's an odd one, seems to want to talk to everybody."

Puzzled over this new development, Peter and Oscar proceeded to the Fitzgerald Lumber Camp to cut some wood.

The spring festivities had concluded after another logging season, and Peter and Oscar were again in North Dakota looking for work. Boxcar travel had brought them about a hundred miles west of Grand Forks. It was past early spring, as they had loitered somewhat at the home of their parents before ascertaining that the Dahl family was sufficiently grown to handle things back at the homestead.

Since it was past the usual hiring time, they were doubtful about any immediate chance of employment, so they were surprised when a bearded little fellow approached them in a small village and asked the usual first question in hiring negotiation, "Lookin' for work, Jack?"

The Dahl brothers, contrary to lumberjack tradition, had not blown quite all their winter's earnings, and so were in a better than usual bargaining position.

"Yeah, we figure on goin' out," Peter stated to the questioner, "but we go out together or not at all."

This was an unusual situation for the bearded Hogan Olson. Lumberjacks were usually hungry after the spring spree and would go out on the employer's terms. Hogan was a bachelor. Although he had a lot of manure to

spread and a fencing project to tackle, he had only planned to hire one man. This was, however, another factor relative to the situation, and it came to Hogan's mind. Since most farm workers liked good cooking and he did not always provide it, he'd had rather tough luck at holding employees. He ignored the fact that these men were obviously partners and came to a quick conclusion that by hiring two men, he might be able to hang onto one.

The Dahl brothers were hired and proceeded to throw the packsacks into Hogan's wagon.

12

Butcherin' This Mornin'

Somewhat past middle age, Hogan, although a jolly man, was not blessed with a wife. He had left Norway shortly after the death of his young bride. In transit, and by some mysterious process, he had changed from Haakon Olson to Hogan Olson.

Nationality was still partial to its own, and the three became fast friends. In time, the cooking problem ceased to exist. Whoever was first to hunger assumed the duties of preparing the meal. In that day of prairie loneliness, friendships grew fast, and soon the Dahl brothers ceased to think of Hogan as being exclusively a boss.

In that time, hired help was also an object of barter. When Hogan had a shortage of work, he would arrange some for the boys at the farms nearby. The two lumberjack packsacks hung side by side on a wall in the little house had become to Hogan a symbol of companionship. Whenever he had to loan out one of the brothers, he made sure they understood it was only temporary, and thus there was no need of even taking the packsack along.

Summer skipped along pleasantly, and all the prairie was absorbed in the tasks of encouraging the growing crop. Hogan was enjoying life more than he had at any time since he had lost his bride in the old country. He had been lonesome for not a few years, and he began to ponder a way to avoid that condition in the future.

There are many problems associated with the settling and developing of new territory. Wise legislators of the past were not ignorant of that fact. Among several devices to encourage settlement was a sort of contract plan known as a "tree claim." Land was usually counted in units of one hundred sixty acres. This unit was referred to as a quarter, that is, a quarter of a section which contained six hundred forty acres. The "tree claim" quarter section could be acquired in addition to the original homestead land if the applicant were willing to plant and nurture a special plot of trees. When Hogan had bought out a disgusted homesteader, he had acquired a tree claim with buildings on it along with his home farm.

It was only a possible solution to loneliness that caused Hogan to begin to mentally place the Dahl brothers on his tree claim. He broached the proposition to the boys subtly several times. The brothers were too polite to flatly reject this kind offer and said only that they'd consider it while they were back in the lumber camp for the winter. And thus, the matter hung. The Dahl brothers, while they did not dislike the blossoming prairie, had no serious plans for farming or anything else.

Summer's watchfulness came to an end, and everyone became occupied in the battle to reap and store the wheat, oats, barley and other small grains that the prairie had produced. Peter and Oscar were on a threshing crew, but had to carry spare clothing in a blanket, because they didn't want Hogan to make a fuss about those doggone packsacks. Long days of hurried labor had kept the boys in top condition. The prairie either broke a man or made him rugged.

The threshing run completed, it was only natural that Peter and Oscar should return to the home of Hogan Olson. After all, a lumberjack's home was wherever his packsack was hanging. And the prairie, finished now with hopeful waiting, took on a sort of carnival air.

The happy trio began attending the mid-week and weekend parties that took place throughout the flatland following the harvest. These parties provided fun for all. Reunited school children romped in bedrooms until sleep finally stole in to stop the play. Farm matrons went over their lives together in the spacious kitchen while their husbands played poker in an adjoining room. Young couples and lovers danced in an empty hayloft to fiddle or wheeze accordion. Food and drink were amply provided. The general thought was that if the crop had been well, certainly everything else ought to be.

Man normally soon has his fill of revelry. Each member of the newly formed trio knew that parting must soon come. The brothers had learned that to the eastward, quite an acreage of flax remained to be threshed. They had calculated the season and determined that if they got in a week or two of flax threshing, it would be almost time to go back to the Fitzgerald Lumber Camp. They told Hogan of their plan. He said it would please him greatly if the three could go to one last party together. Then he would feel better about beginning the fall plowing. The party was held on the following Friday night and turned out to be a dandy.

Peter, Oscar and Hogan came stumbling across stubble fields in the early dawn of Saturday morning. Hogan, who read extensively in his solitude, made an observation, "Ya know who we are? We're the Three Musketeers." All of them were well-filled with country cocktails.

"We gotta make some coffee when we get home," was Oscar's answer to this declaration. Peter had been engaged in a long, sorrowful lumberjack ditty for the past half mile.

Oscar, true to his intention, began making coffee when they lurched into Hogan's house. Hogan had another plan in mind. When he bought supplies, he was not stingy. If he said he had a little alcohol in the house, said alcohol would not be computed in half pints but rather in gallons. So, while Oscar made coffee, Hogan began preparing warm water to go with alcohol and a spoonful of sugar. The coffee was forgotten.

The three pals sat in the little house sipping their drinks and reviewing the summer. It was agreed that the crop had been good. They discussed the merits of the fiddle player who had been at the party. It was decided that the alcohol was of excellent quality.

"I know what's wrong with me," Hogan stated. "I'm hungry for fresh meat. When I get drinkin' a little, I get a cravin' for meat."

No reply came from his thoughtful audience, so Hogan still had the floor.

"Wouldn't we be damn fools to set here meat-hungry with all kinds of it running around outside?" It was still a monologue. "Ya know what we're gonna do, boys? We're gonna butcher a pig."

This brought a response from Oscar. "It's too early in the fall." Nature was North Dakota's only refrigerator.

"We got some late ones that won't weigh a hundred pounds yet. We'll take one a' them, an' Monday we'll bring the hams into Larson and let him smoke 'em. There's neighbors enuff for the rest a' the meat."

"Suit yourself, but I gotta lay down a few minutes," was Oscar's decision.

Peter and Hogan had a fresh drink while the project was being discussed.

"Let Oscar sleep. We kin handle this little job," Peter ventured.

The two friends reeled over to the pig lot where Hogan grabbed the smallest squealer and rapped it on the head with an old hardwood tree limb, which had been used in hitching up horses. He then slashed at the little pig's throat with his pocketknife, turning to Peter saying, "We got no woman to make sausage, so it ain't much use a' savin' the blood."

Task well underway, the friends agreed it would be nice to have a drink before dressing out the meat. They dragged the pig along and dropped it in front of the house.

Several drinks later, the men noticed neighbor Peterson's team and wagon coming into the yard. The next drink mixed found Peterson using Oscar's cup. He had arisen wobbly from the big party and decided it would be a good day to take a little jag of wheat to town and pick up some sharpened plowshares at the blacksmith.

The pleasant morning hummed along. Peterson, who originally stopped in to see if the fellows needed anything from town, forgot both wheat and plowshares.

Hogan, trying to remember what he had intended to tell Peterson, finally saw through the fog.

"We're butcherin' this mornin'. Need a little fresh meat?"

"When ya gonna start?" queried Peterson.

"We're half done. Didn't you see that pig layin' in front a' the house?"

"My horses snorted a little comin' inta th' yard, but I didn't see no pig."

Peter and Hogan rose sharply from where they sat. "Who in the hell stole that pig?" the latter said.

"Maybe the dog took it away," Peter offered.

"Dog been layin' over in that corner all morning'."

"Could that damn pig a' come back to life?" Peter speculated.

"Yesus, Peterson, that damn pig is layin' somewhere wounded. Yer goin' to town – get goin' – an' get the horse doctor out here."

But Peterson was reluctant to leave such pleasant surroundings. He kept delaying departure. Hogan, often amazed by his own intelligence while drinking, was not to be denied. He sloshed half of a gallon tin of alcohol into a milk pail and dumped in a like amount of water. He then tipped some sugar into the mixture and tossed in a porcelain dipper.

"Here," he said, handing the pail to Peterson. "Ya don't wanna leave good likker behind, we got that fixed. Take it along with ya."

Peterson needed yet another concession. Somebody had to go along with him. Oscar was the obvious choice.

When they shook him to get started out with Peterson, he said, "It's still too early to butcher a pig."

They tenderly helped Oscar into the wagon and Hogan's final speech to Peterson was, "Yer job is not to stand here an' argue, yer job is to get that pig fixed up."

Peterson and Oscar hadn't gone far when Oscar found he had a terrible thirst. Since the warm fall weather had dried up all standing water, he had to drink out of Peterson's milk pail. The next road crossing found them harmonizing in song.

Back at the point of departure, Peter and Hogan had decided to look for the pig. They had just begun when another neighbor drove into the yard in a Model T Ford. He was Joe Voss. A healthy winner in the previous evening's poker game, he was out looking for new worlds to conquer.

Hospitality has its rules, and there was again a trio sitting at the kitchen table.

Joe was both a good talker and a good listener, so when late afternoon arrived the pig was completely forgotten.

13

Two Jail Cells

But Peterson hadn't forgotten that pig. When he and Oscar finally reached the village, he steered the horses directly to the livery barn. Sure enough, there was the horse doctor. That worthy medic had experienced a fine day of bill collection. Many of the meetings had included a friendly drink. Since it was apparent to him the two visitors were drunk, he didn't attach too much significance to what they said, especially since Peterson's opening statement had been, "Yer job is not to stand here an' argue, yer job is to get out an' find that pig."

"Get yer team in here an' feed 'em. It's on me. I got a drink er two in the office, maybe we kin sit down an' figure out what in hell yer talkin' about?" the horse doctor said.

Visitors came and went. The cozy office at the livery barn was filled with alcoholic rumor and speculation all evening. During a lull in the conversation around midnight, Peterson recalled his mission.

"That pig is wounded real bad," he told the horse doctor. Oscar didn't know what the fuss was all about. The last time he'd heard talk of a pig, it seemed to him Peter and Hogan had butchered one.

The horse doctor, while hardly able to navigate, had not lost his devotion to the sacred oath. "Jesus Christ," he bellowed, "why didn't you tell me that pig was wounded? Let's get to movin'. We gotta get out an' fix that pig."

Back at Hogan's home, the permanent occupant stirred in his cot. It was hazy outside, and he had to locate the faint sun to determine if it was morning or evening. It was morning, he decided, as he went to the water pail. He looked out a kitchen window and blinked his eyes several times. Along the barn where Joe's Model T stood parked, there appeared to be a wagon and a team of horses.

"Damned if that don't look like Peterson's outfit," he murmured. Since he had to let the dog out anyway, he might as well go over and investigate.

When Hogan got halfway to the wagon, the dog started barking. He was startled when a huge black hat started rising into view.

"Where's that pig?" the horse doctor said, rubbing his eyes.

"What pig?" asked the astonished Hogan.

"Jesus Christ, you farmers are gonna put me in the nuthouse yet," roared the snappish horse doctor.

"Since supper time last night, I been trailin' a wounded pig, an' when I get to the owner, he sez 'What pig?'"

The horse doctor was known for quick temper, and Hogan, memory returning slowly, searched for a way to placate him.

"I decided not to butcher," he said. But it was a poor choice, and only added fuel to the fire.

"Who in hell is talkin' about butcherin'? I'm a horse doctor, not a butcher."

In the hubbub that followed, sleepers in the wagon and in the house were aroused. The consensus was that an effort should be made to locate the pig. The horse doctor had come out to give professional care and he was absolutely not going to leave with the mission unaccomplished.

"If we can't find him, maybe he'll come to feed. That is, if he's still livin'," Peter volunteered.

This was considered a sound decision by the group. Hogan went for a pail of barley as the group sidled down to the pig's feed trough.

"Sooie – sooie – sooie," screamed the crestfallen Hogan.

The motley collection of men turned as they heard a rustle in the nearby corn patch. Out dashed a pig, in answer to Hogan's call. On its chest were a few flecks of blood. When it dived into the trough, the horse doctor grabbed it by a hind leg.

"Hell," he said, the critical examination completed. "This pig ain't wounded. All you done was lower his blood pressure a coupla notches."

With the pig located, and the harvest celebration finally exhausted, Peter and Oscar rode into town with Joe Voss, packsacks in hand. As the Model T lurched forward in the morning air, Hogan – standing in the door of his home – wiped a tear with his sleeve and yelled with his voice cracking, "Don't forget what I said about the tree claim." The boys politely nodded to signify they had heard.

The trip to find flax threshing took approximately one hour. The village Peter and Oscar had been told of was so tiny they almost missed it. Fortunately, the freight train switched out some cars to a grain elevator siding. Otherwise, it probably wouldn't have even slowed down.

Both Peter and Oscar were sick when they arrived in the little Dakota farming town.

They decided to see if a store of some kind would be open as they needed some snuff and shaving supplies. A low, rambling building was the only one of a dozen varied businesses that seemed to have a sign of life. Above the stained windows was a weather-beaten sign that stated simply, "Bowling Alley." A less-seasoned space above it indicated there had been another sign present. That sign now lay behind the building in a patch of weeds and miscellaneous debris claiming, "Finest Liquor Served." A man named Volstead had torn it down.

The shaky boys made their purchases and had just stepped out into the deserted street when a tall, thin chap with a nervous Adam's apple and handlebar mustache stepped up and greeted out, "Howdy." He had a silvery star on his thin chest. Both boys almost began to run. The yard bull incident flashed into their minds, and they knew they had finally been apprehended.

"I gotta go to supper," the surprising law man said, "so I'll fetch ya over to where ya kin stay tonight."

He certainly had an unusual method of arrest, the Dahl brothers silently concluded. By his manner, he seemed to have the relaxed confidence of a well-armed veteran campaigner. While leading the boys to what he described as the village Fire Hall, he confided that he was the town Marshal.

A small, oblong building came into view. It suffered mutely from lack of paint and upkeep. Upon reaching it, the boys found it to contain a shiny red wagon which a steel barrel was mounted upon. The gadget with a long handle was obviously a hand pump. Across the little room and beyond the pot-bellied stove were two jail cells constructed of flat straps of steel. Peter made a quick observation. The cement floor was heaved so much that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to close the cell doors.

"Ain't had anyone to look after the stove fires for almost a week," the town Marshal offered.

"When I spot a clean lookin' fella needs lodgin', I bring 'im in. Most fellas wud rather toss in a little coal than sleep chilly. Fer eighteen dollars a month I ain't figurin' on puttin' in two hundred hours a week."

Peter and Oscar were dumbfounded. It seemed they weren't under arrest.

"Lookin' fer work er jest passin' through?" The Marshal asked. "If it's work yer after, I kin help. Know every soul fer miles around, an' they all know me too."

Oscar quietly wondered, 'What next?'

Peter answered, "We thought we might pick up some flax threshing before we go back to the woods."

"Hang around a little in the mornin'. I mighta heard somethin'." The gangling official turned to go. "Don't be afeered to use coal. Ever' winter that damn fire wagon freezes up and busts, 'n' the mayor sez to me, 'Don't you tell a soul, people might get panicky."

Well, here was a development. Free lodging, courtesy of the town Marshal, before they even had to look up a jungle or livery barn.

Hunger remained paralyzed from Hogan's final party, so the Dahl brothers proceeded to make comfortable the steel cots in the jail cells. "I get kinda uneasy, sleepin' in this place," Oscar explained to his yawning brother.

"If you get uneasy, just think about how chilly the nights are getting," was the answer.

Dawn brought the return of the town Marshal.

"The Wilcox place is gonna commence flax threshin' tomorra," was the announcement. "Be aroun' the Bowling Alley this afternoon, an' yer a cinch to go out."

Business completed, the three sat leisurely in the warm room and talked of crops, threshing, the Minnesota woods, and any number of unrelated subjects. The Marshal enjoyed any peaceful contact with the outside world. He had his regular route through the village, where he gossiped and passed the time of day. But new information from the mysterious corners of the world caused his morning schedule to be delayed.

Peter and Oscar walked slowly through the village when their empty stomachs compelled them to redirect their focus. Peter told Oscar it might be wise to see if there was a hotel like the one in Iowa around town. He noticed that transients occasionally had come in for a meal there. The comfort of the Fire Hall had made him reluctant to begin cooking in a chilly jungle.

Towards the end of that day, they unwittingly passed an open restaurant and were unable to find a hotel, so they prepared the day's first meal in the jungle.

14

West Coast Apples

The Bowling Alley, where the Dahl brothers quietly sat out the afternoon waiting for a Wilcox flax threshing man, provided an interesting place. Despite its name, it had not had alleys for many years. Two pool tables occupied the place where alleys had been. Actually, it never housed bowling, but had once been a place to play "duckpins," a game similar to bowling, but played with smaller pins and balls on a shorter alley.

Duckpins had become a hazard to life and limb and so had long since been eliminated. The duckpin ball, being lighter and more easily handled than a latter-day bowling ball, had often become a weapon when tempers were aroused. The fact that it had been an admirable feat to chuck the ball directly at the pins without touching the alley had become annoying to poker and rummy players. The riot between the farmers to the north of the village and those from the south had been the final deciding factor in the death of the game. Not a usable piece of glass had survived in the entire building. The county sheriff had determined that the missiles responsible had been duckpin balls.

Several local youths, old enough to frequent the Bowling Alley, but not yet financially qualified for the poker game, had joined the conversation.

Peter and Oscar sat quietly in high round-backed chairs, with the town Marshal seated between them.

"They're getting a carload of Montana broncos over at the livery stable in a day or so," a fuzzy-faced boy volunteered.

"Man, is that sumthin' to see," the town Marshal added.

Oscar the horseman was interested but did not inquire. People made him nervous, and he was already well over his usual day's quota of snuff.

"How do they act?" Peter asked.

"They're rounded up out there, an' inside o' a few days they wind up here. Never had a man even so much as look at 'em before. The livery stable man won't let nobody sleep in his barn when he gets a carload o' them critter in. Las' fall, a travelin' man went in that barn to sleep. He didn't know nothin' about them ornery devils

bein' in there. He walked behind one o' them stalls an' got kicked. When they found him, he was trampled flat. His head had been split open like a ripe punkin."

The Dahl brothers found this strange occurrence interesting as well as horrible. Oscar, who had never seen an animal he couldn't handle, was now beyond curious to see this spirited beast.

During the discussion of last fall's tragedy, a member of the Wilcox clan had entered the Bowling Alley. As farmers came and went at intervals, he was not immediately noticed by the town Marshal. When the lawman finally spied him, a soft exchange of greeting was followed by business negotiation, and soon the town Marshal beckoned to Peter and Oscar.

Flax threshing was nearly like any other kind that Peter and Oscar had known. The following morning, they were cautioned to avoid handling the clinging bundles roughly. A good crop of flax required the presence of many favorable elements, and the fortunate farmer was likely to harvest it with a care typical of an oil man bringing in a promising well. The second afternoon of the project became marred by a slight mist. Evening brought a pelting fall rain that definitely cancelled threshing. So, Wilcox paid the brothers off, and brought them back to the village, saying he didn't know when they'd be able to go back to threshin'.

The town Marshal, in his evening check, was happy to find the brothers back at the Fire Hall. Peter and Oscar had become thoroughly wet before they had gotten their horses back to the Wilcox barn. They had drying clothes hung in every conceivable manner above the pot-bellied stove. The Marshal visited for more than an hour before the boys were alone again.

"How do you see it, Oscar?" Peter was inquiring. "Shall we hit back for the woods?"

Oscar was seldom quick in response, so Peter instinctively knew he would wait for the reply.

"We got it purty good here, do you calculate we could hang around a coupla days an' see these Montana horses?"

Peter was usually the instigator of any plan that was not a common practice, so he reasoned that it would not be too unequal if Oscar had some say occasionally. It was, also, a little early for logging to begin.

"If that's your pleasure, Oscar, it oughta be alright to hang around a few days," Peter concluded. Neither had any idea that the couple days would become many.

That very night, Peter and Oscar had unexpected guests. The Bowling Alley, subject of closer regulation due to the newness of Prohibition, had closed at one a.m. during the height of festivities. Rain had released many a farmer from his work and given him an opportunity for harvest-time rejoicing.

Several members of the Village Volunteer Fire Department were at the Bowling Alley. They and a few of their friends decided to hold an impromptu fire meeting. They arrived at the Fire Hall shortly after legal closing, complete with the now-forbidden fruit of the vine. The remainder of the night was spent in talk which was punctuated regularly with liquor.

The Montana bronco, now on display at the livery stable, fascinated Oscar. He went daily to observe the early stages of training. Peter, meanwhile, was making and enjoying new friendships at the Bowling Alley.

"That guy, named Dahl, is a crackerjack with horses," the livery stable owner said not infrequently. "A horse or a dog," he continued, "don't take long to find out what authority a man got. An' he always seems to act according to it. When this Dahl talks to a horse, that horse listens."

Oscar was engrossed in the breakin' of the wiry Montana broncos and paid little heed to the flying days. He and the livery stable owner hung sacks of grain behind the savage animals, allowing them to kick until they were discouraged. Every day they quietly harnessed the snorting demons with the aid of a stick which held a small open hook. They trained the bronco to lead by tying him to the off side of a stout saddle horse.

"When these critters are broke," the livery stable man told Oscar, "They make a first-class field horse. That is, providin' the farmer can handle 'em an' don't get all his machinery wrecked. Fer many years, the farmer been workin' too big a horse. Get a tough bugger around 'leven, twelve hundred pounds, an' you got the right article."

Peter was learning a trade with an equally old background. He was playing in the lower-stake card games at the Bowling Alley. He had discovered the function of a restaurant, and helped his brother realize the value of that modern convenience. Quite often the Fire Hall was the scene of late evening social activity. Peter was also oblivious to the passing of time. Indian Summer was in the prairie land, and the crops had been good. Even the delay of flax threshing was not a cause for worry.

Barkie, Peter's new friend, had been teaching him to play pool. Barkie's name was a contraction of his former occupation, barkeeper. He had been dubbed thus before Prohibition while employed at the Bowling Alley as a dispenser of drink. It was quietly rumored that Barkie had not allowed the Volstead Act to catch him unprepared. He was supposed to have a considerable supply of liquor cached away, local legend had it. Peter was the object of envy among the younger men since Barkie obviously liked him. Barkie was neither old nor young, but was that worldwide type of creature whose age often remains constant for nearly half a century.

When Barkie, with several Volunteer Fire Department members, arrived at the Fire Hall one midnight, the huge supply of liquor he had with him was not considered a matter to be discussed. Oscar, tired from wrestling broncos, had been asleep since early evening, and was refreshed enough to sit up and join the party. Peter had preceded the guests by only a few minutes.

An exciting new topic was up for discussion. Three young men had stopped at the Bowling Alley during late afternoon while their overheated automobile stood resting across the road. They were going out west to make the apple harvesting. Young enthusiasm had been distributed throughout the rickety building. Reaction from the strange idea continued. So did refreshments. The Dahl brothers, evidently the most widely traveled, were asked about their adventures.

Conversation wavered between travel and apple crops. Someone had to tell Oscar the approximate distance between the home of the apple and the home of the bronco. Peter became reckless and told of the hasty escape from the felling of the yard bull.

By the time the night was about half spent, only four intrepid young men were sitting up. Several had curled up quietly around the bottom of the stove. The floor was damp, as a curious guest had investigated the workings of the hand pump on the water wagon.

The muffled talk was interrupted by the screaming whistle of the four-thirty a.m. local freight train. It was closely followed by Barkie's shriek, "Let's make the apples."

As if touched by hypnotism, the four upright companions leaped into action. The Fire Hall door was left swinging idly in the rising wind.

"We gotta hurry to make it," yelled Peter. The four men were dashing to the little depot like raiders into attack.

"It's a through freight," Peter loudly declared. "Locals don't go far."

Only Peter, Oscar and Barkie were able to climb in the open-doored boxcar. The train was picking up speed and left the fourth potential apple picker shouting his anguish to the cold north wind.

"We'll have the best whiskey on the whole west coast," yelled Barkie. "This stuff was made in fourteen." He patted the quart bottle under his arm.

The travelers soon became cold despite the bottled energy they had with them. They opened the door of the boxcar and saw the first hard snow of the winter season in its beginning.

Although they did not at that moment know it, the freight was only a local, with its run nearly completed.

A trip to the West Coast apples would have been a long one.

15

Test of Reason

A railroad brakeman was talking business with the local depot agent in another tiny village. They discussed the origin and destination of four similar connected boxcars. One of the cars was the very cold temporary home of three men with plans of making the apple harvest. The three riders, swinging arms violently to keep warm, defied all hobo tradition and came directly to the warm stove in the depot. All were dressed lightly, as the cold snap in the weather was somewhat unexpected.

"Oscar, can it be we're getting dumber with age instead of smarter?" asked a disgruntled Peter.

"I gotta get back home. I'm lined up to start work at nine," a sheepish Barkie said.

Oscar, numbed by the disastrous turn of events, said nothing but huddled against the depot stove with his arms crossed.

A check of group finances showed a total of approximately three and a half dollars. Barkie's fare back would be something near two dollars. To attempt to ride back on a freight would be suicidal in the bitterly cold weather. It was decided that Barkie should return to his home. He would then send back the packsacks belonging to Peter and Oscar and they would sit tight and wait for a few days of good weather. Decision having been reached, the three waited for the morning passenger train that would return Barkie to his hometown.

Peter and Oscar, fearful of wearing out their welcome at the depot, decided to look around the village after bidding farewell to Barkie. They walked in and out of several establishments.

"What kind of accent these people got?" Oscar inquired of Peter.

"They must be Germans, according to the names of the stores," Peter replied.

They sat on empty cream cans in a little produce station and tried to reason something out of the mess. Peter told the proprietor of the circumstance that had brought them to the town. And in the telling of it, he had to laugh along with the proprietor. Oscar saw little humor in the situation and idly wondered how the broncos were getting on.

A situation existed that was unknown to the Dahl brothers. During the Big War, many migratory farm workers thought it patriotic to refrain from working for a farmer who was of German descent. There was little logic in this, as bread was made from wheat regardless of who produced the wheat. But a situation can often exist without logic, and the farmer with a German-sounding name was at the rear of the class when it came to availability of manpower. Although the war was over, foolishness was not, and hired help had been a scarce article in this predominantly German area.

A fleshy, red-faced farmer came into the little produce station to reclaim his cream cans and get his check. He peered at the Dahl brothers momentarily.

"You boyce vunt to vurk?"

It was a totally unexpected question and did not bring an immediate reply.

"I needen vun man. Und, Sweisser – neighbor to me – is needin' man too. His blace oney vun haf mile. Schemel iss min name."

"If you're not in a hurry, we'd like to talk it over for a minute," Peter told the stout fellow.

Oscar looked blankly at his brother. The brothers talked it over and concluded they could possibly get straightened out and get a little money together to be able to ride the passenger train home. Anyway you looked at it, leisure was generally harmful to them, so it better be back to work.

Agreed on this policy, Peter answered the farmer, "We'll go out. If you have a few minutes, I'd like to go to the post office." To Oscar he added softly, "Just in case." Oscar was puzzled.

But Oscar understood when they hurried to the post office and Peter sent a card to their parents wishing them well and adding, "Oscar and I have got such interesting jobs here we're not sure if we'll go to the woods this winter."

As the farm-bound group bumped along the road in a horse-drawn wagon, a question was churning in Schemel's mind. They would come to Sweisser's farm before his own. Sweisser had many cattle and had requested that his neighbor bring out a hired man if he found one. Which one should he drop off at Sweisser's place? Schemel admired raw power in the performance of work rather than cleverness, so his first thought has been to retain Oscar for his own farm. On the other hand, this smaller man might possibly be the better of the two. Several times lately he had found the obvious to be untrue. Who would have thought the Fatherland would be decisively beaten? Also, it would be little short of tragedy if he brought Sweisser a real good man and kept a

poor one for himself. He computed every angle of the unknown and finally thought, if they're both the same, I keep the one who is best company.

Oscar was dropped off at the Sweisser farm.

Peter's work at the Schemel farm began as soon as the rattling wagon came to a stop. As they put the horses in the barn, Schemel told him that he needed a man to bring the kids and the schoolmarm to the little schoolhouse each day. Schemel also had nearly a hundred tons of hay that was stacked several miles from the barn. This had to be hauled home in winter, as there had been too little time during summer for such action. Peter was not worried by the prospect of hard work. If things went well, he and Oscar would be back at the Fitzgerald Lumber Camp in a few weeks.

Chores mostly completed, Peter and his new employer went to the large farmhouse for the evening meal. They sat down to a large spread and Peter looked around unconcernedly to see who lived in the house. He checked off four small children, Schemel's wife and then the casual scrutiny came to an abrupt halt. Is this beautiful girl Schemel's daughter, or can it be the schoolmarm, Peter speculated breathlessly.

While finishing evening chores, Schemel told him the girl was indeed the schoolmarm. She stayed at the Schemel home. This was her first year of teaching and her name was Marie Krause. Her parents had a farm about twenty-five miles to the north but, Schemel added, she was not a regular "Deutsche," she was half "Swede."

The next morning was the first trip to the schoolhouse with horses and sled. The wintry storm had increased, and drifted snow now clogged the narrow roads. Peter and the schoolmarm spoke little. She's real good lookin' but acts kind of stuck-up, Peter silently decided. Marie had a few thoughts of her own. Older sisters had warned her of the smooth-spoken city slicker. He's only a hick puttin' on airs, was her conclusion.

Schemel hadn't the opportunity to speak with Sweisser, but in the days that followed, he chuckled and thought he got the best man for himself. Peter knew only one way to work, and he hustled throughout the day.

A half mile away, Sweisser was also chuckling. He had found out that Oscar had a younger brother working for Schemel. "That dumkoff Schemel," he muttered to himself. "To me brung da best vun – himself keeps da kid."

The long winter evenings passed pleasantly. A hard coal heater was the focal point of the gathering, and the entire group participated. Peter and the schoolmarm were engaged in a policy of mutual aloofness. And during one of the evenings, Peter thought he sensed actual hostility.

Schemel's oldest daughter was studying her history. Her class had progressed to the point where the Civil War was under discussion. Something about the lesson had her confused, so she turned to Marie for clarification.

Schemel, quietly reading the latest edition of Die Deutsches Zeitung silently patted himself on the back for the way he had made knowledge available to his children. Real knowledge, he knew, existed only in the Fatherland, but he was doing the best he could under the circumstances.

Marie patiently began echoing textbooks she had known applicable to the Civil War. The child still did not have the picture clearly.

"Perhaps I might be able to help you." Peter said this before he realized he was going to speak. Never skillful at backing out of a situation, he had to continue. The teachings of Tom Wood had also included some history.

He told the little girl the Civil War had causes that are as yet controversial. Then he had to explain "controversial." In simple language he explained that economics entered into the event. He finished with one of Tom's theories about the value of a society where producer and consumer are actually one.

The little girl was satisfied. Schemel, surprised that a common hired man would know anything, asked several questions. He knew little American history, but considered what he was told in relation to a possible similarity with the Fatherland.

Marie was transfixed. Her sharp blue eyes were clouded with either fascination or distaste. She was a blonde girl with pronounced cheekbones and creamy skin. Her rich, full lips were motionless. Peter thought, I've gone and got her even madder.

Several evenings later, the same little girl inquired about Indian warfare in the region of the Mississippi River. Marie – who always heard that a schoolmarm had knowledge trapped – concentrated on a clear, explicit answer. Having concluded, she became quite formal and turned to Peter. "Do you agree with me, Dahl?" she asked, triumphantly.

Peter groaned inwardly, and said half-apologetically, "As a matter o' fact, Ma'am, I don't."

Schemel leaned forward slowly in his chair and said, "Vait vunce, how many kinds history are having you in dis land?"

The ensuing discussion lasted several hours. Peter had a tremendous advantage, but politeness whispered to him to withhold some of it. Tom had taught him to break open the printed word and make it stand up to the glaring test of reason. Marie knew what the textbook said. Schemel knew what he had been told.

None of them realized that knowledge unopened to question can hardly be called knowledge at all.

Mrs. Schemel, recalling her childhood home filled with Teutonic love, hastily put on some cocoa for the debaters.

When the discussion abated and the children were filing off to their beds, Marie apparently laid aside animosity and several times Peter noticed she looked him directly in the eye and smiled.

Her smile made his innards tighten and as he went to his chilly room upstairs, he mused, a woman sure is a funny thing.

16

Cocoa and Cookies

Oscar came to visit Peter regularly on Saturday evenings. He was learning the practice of breeding good cattle and thus was not discontent with his job. Schemel was courteous to the Dahl brothers and was secretly elated that his home had been chosen for the brotherly visits.

As early winter evenings went on, there was more discussion. Peter and the schoolmarm had not many differences on the validity of history. But Peter admitted to himself there was no real kinship between Marie and him to replace the imagined hostility of the past.

A few days before Christmas, Peter was given an assignment by Schemel. The schoolmarm had arranged by letter that her father would meet her at the next town. She was to take the train to that point and so had to be taken to town in time to catch the nine o'clock evening passenger train. That meant he would have to have the team and sled ready to go immediately following supper.

The evening was warm and moonlit as the journey began. After a half hour of silence, Marie took off the heavy robe that had bundled her legs and stood up to enjoy the evening. Peter was standing in the forward part of the sleigh whistling softly to the horses. Movement behind him caused him to turn just as Marie tripped on the extended foot of the seat.

As if catapulted by dynamite, they were in each other's arms. Between straining kisses, Marie was sobbing softly. A salty tear stung Peter's lips pleasantly.

Words, precisely considered in the past, came out in a veritable flood.

"Marie, I've been batty about you ever since I saw you, but I never figured you could like me."

"I don't like you, Pete, I love you," was the reply.

Periods of rapid talk were interspersed with silence when lips sought lips.

The horses idled along, reins dragging silently in the snow. And when the dazed lovers noticed a cessation of motion, the team was stompin at the hitching post in town.

"Please don't leave Schemel's while I'm home," Marie pleaded softly as she kissed Peter goodbye.

"I'll be there, sweetheart, be sure you get back," Peter murmured softly.

And the return home amazed the horses. The drive, not boisterous on the trip to town, was flowing with shouted lumberjack songs all the way home.

Several days later Oscar had occasion to pass the Schemel farm while hauling hay. He met Peter, who was just starting a trip in the opposite direction.

"We got about enough money to go home now," Oscar reminded his brother after the loud hello.

"I don't feel like goin' home," Peter said.

"You like your job that much?"

"Wasn't thinkin' about the job."

"What was you thinkin' about?"

"The schoolmarm."

Oscar thought this over solemnly. Then he began to chuckle softly. He remembered that Peter had pined for several days upon leaving his girlfriend in Iowa. But in a week, no more mention had been made of her.

"Don't make too much difference to me, one way or another," Oscar offered. "But if you get of a mind to go back to the woods, come on over to Sweisser's an' let me know."

When Marie returned, both she and Peter merely glazed over the days in the anxiety to spend the long winter evenings in the Schemel living room.

The Schemel family noticed that the schoolmarm and the hired man seemed sweet on each other. But no outright declaration was made by them. While Mrs. Schemel trod endlessly through the house, her man would quietly sit near a lamp reflector reading Die Deutsches Zeitung. The lovers had hit upon a subterfuge to hold hands without undue embarrassment. They played checkers.

A student of checkers or chess would have concluded their game was completely cockeyed. In making a move across the board, Peter's hand would gently clasp Marie's. Competition would be suspended while they gazed wonderingly at each other. When a romping child broke the spell, neither would recall the continuity of the game.

And Schemel, occasionally aware of the happening, would smile furtively and think, I wonder if Selma and I were that way?

When winter days had lengthened considerably, the surrounding community was notified of the Spring Basket Social to be held in Marie's tiny schoolhouse. This social event was held to defray education expense of new books for study and fictional amusement. It was usually held before spring planning, as nothing could be allowed to detract from the farm family's interest in that vital necessity.

Schemel, his eyes twinkling, told Marie and Peter they would be wise to use a team and buggy themselves for the big occasion. The children had to be in bed before too late. He and Selma would use the sled and another team, as there still was enough snow for sleighing.

This announcement came as a surprise to Schemel's wife. Indirectly, she had brought it about.

Women are particularly sensitive to romance. Mrs. Schemel had noticed what she termed "sheep eyes" quite some time before Schemel did. Her busy day had often included thoughts concerning Marie and Peter. One evening as she became increasingly aware of the coming of spring, she shifted back into the Low German tongue she and her husband saved for emergencies and told Schemel of her ponderings.

"When a man and a woman keep looking at each other like that, things usually get worse before they get better," she told Schemel.

"Look after your own business, woman, let the next man look after his," was the advice he had for her.

"This is our business," Mrs. Schemel said shortly.

"For why?"

"A schoolmarm came here. It is not right that a schoolmarm and a baby should leave here."

"Why is it you women always have to worry?"

"I'll tell you why. You and I talked about having two kids. We got four and if something don't happen soon, we'll have five. Am I worrying foolish?"

Schemel, temporarily silenced, thought it over. He concluded that, in the Fatherland, a woman does not tell her man what to do next. So, he sought for a course of action directly contrary to the good advice.

Marie and Peter were almost dazed by the opportunity to caress away from observing eye. On the way home they kissed and hugged one another with ferocity, leaving them breathless and confused. Neither was able to fall asleep easily that night. A similar thought had struck them. The weather was getting warmer.

The lovers continued nightly with the disorganized checker game. The contest was now being held on a smaller table and when Peter's knee touched Marie's hand then remained motionless in that desirable position. And he became acquainted with one of the most subtle forms of torture.

A week of warm winds succeeded in wiping away practically all the snow. When the long dormant tree and bush began its annual rebirth, Mrs. Schemel came to a decision. Without saying anything to Schemel, she decided to become a vigilante committee of one. If Peter and Marie tarried too long on an evening walk, Mrs. Schemel sent her oldest daughter bounding down the road to tell the young couple her mama was serving cocoa and cookies.

Peter made his first visit to the Sweisser farm to see Oscar. He found Oscar sitting on the front porch watching the sinking sun.

"What in thunder brings you away from the schoolmarm?" Oscar boomed pleasantly.

"Seems like every spring brings along more planning," grinned Peter.

"What's plannin' now?"

"Oscar, I'm gonna get married."

Oscar sat in stunned silence. He had watched the budding romance with an interested good humor but had figured it to be an affair somewhat little more significant than Peter's affection for the Iowa cook. He thought quickly that Peter's judgment, usually good, must have gone cockeyed.

His confusion led to say, "How come?"

"We have to."

"No, not that!"

"No, not what you could be thinking. Marie and I are to the place where we either get married or it'll be a mess. Where could a man get a better wife?" he queried.

"She agree?"

"Yes, we been talkin' about it a couple of weeks. We're gettin' married the day after school's out."

"Where you gonna live?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No."

"That's what I come over to see you about, Oscar."

"What have I got to do with that, Peter?"

"I'm writing to Hogan tonight to find out if Marie and I can live on his tree claim. I'm sure Hogan would like to have you with him again. If you say alright, I'll kill two birds with one stone and find out if you and I can both get situated."

Oscar was silent for a minute. Peter sat patiently awaiting the answer.

"Go ahead, Peter. I like Hogan. Be nice to be a neighbor to you an' Marie."

"That's fine, Oscar. I better be getting' back. Takes me quite a while to write a sensible letter."

"Peter."

"Yes?"

"Mighty thoughtful o' you to think about me, now you got a woman."

"I see it this way, Oscar. Even though I got a woman, it isn't likely that I will forget my ol' brother in a boxcar."

The Isolated Farmer

Correspondence completed and arrangements made, the newlyweds were guests of Hogan Olson at his home three days after school had been let out. They sat together on one side of the oblong kitchen table while Oscar and Hogan sat on the other. The early summer day was clear and sunny, the feasters were all in high spirits.

"Didn't think you'd have roast beef, Hogan, I thought maybe you'd butcher a pig," Peter said with a smirk.

"Last time I tried butchering a pig – you remember – didn't work out so good," was the grinning reply.

Marie was told of the incident and the meal was delayed by laughter.

"Peterson and his family an' me were up to the tree claim las' Sunday and got the house cleaned up," Hogan offered when the group returned to seriousness.

"Got her lookin' purty good. There're enough odds an' ends in there to start housekeepin'," he added.

Hogan advised Peter with impressive force. "There's plenty work to keep Oscar and me goin'. When you get squared around an' figure on goin' back to work, jus' stay on with us here," was Hogan's advice.

The honeymoon, never formally declared, went on and on. Marie planted a garden even though it was almost past planting time. Peter worked for Hogan and other nearby neighbors. He never ventured so far that he couldn't return to the clean little house in the grove of trees. Never was a spot of prairie ground the scene of more happiness.

Each evening, when robust strides brought Peter to his home, his loving wife greeted him with a lunch. Over coffee and cookies, the day was reviewed.

Kindly farm women, appareled with apron and giant sun bonnet, occasionally strolled across the fields to visit the new neighbor lady. A busy crop season made these visits infrequent enough to give them valued novelty.

Every Sunday afternoon became an occasion to politely return these calls. Marie and Peter had been given the use of Hogan's driving horses, as he was now the possessor of a fine new Overland automobile. The newlywed Dahls gradually became integrated into the community and were no longer looked upon as strangers.

But when time came to begin threshing the bountiful prairie crop, Marie and Peter were forced by circumstance to be apart for several days at a time. Threshing began early in the morning, and often continued past sundown, so Peter was usually not able to return to his home nightly. Weather was the only factor that could delay the harvest battle. And while watchful farmers scanned the sky hoping for continued sunshine, Peter went through the same process looking for a cloud that would permit him to return to his wife.

During one of her earliest periods of solitude, Marie had a male visitor. He was a director of the county school board, and his mission was business.

Word had just been received that the local schoolmarm previously engaged for the coming school year would be unable to fulfill her agreement. Although not given to panic, Marie found the issue was certainly one for concern, and told the school representative she would be happy to help if needed, but it would be wise for him to continue in his efforts to fill the post, as she was unable to consult her husband at the present.

Pregnancy was a special secret to country women in many cases. The cartoon showing a puzzled male observing his wife engaged in tiny knitting was not ill-founded. In view of this development, Marie decided she had best tell her mate of the coming event. It would not be right if a school board man had to be informed of it before Peter was. In addition, there was one other consideration.

Peter had an opportunity to begin farming on his own. Hogan had offered to rent the cropland on the tree claim to Peter and his new bride. There was inconvenience involved in farming the tree claim, so far as Hogan was concerned. The land did not adjoin his home fields, and thus work on the tree claim was made less consistent by the fact that the machinery had to be moved back and forth. During autumn evenings, Hogan's visits were driven with coffee and talk about prevailing local farm rental agreements. Peter was somewhat reluctant, even a little jittery. The gamble of farming did not frighten him. He was merely of the opinion that he could not muster enough money to adequately swing the deal.

As they lay awake in bed discussing the proposal, Marie told Peter of her increasing favor for the deal. She believed a man who worked like Peter should be working for himself. Besides, she added, work did not scare her either. German thrift came into view as she told Peter, to the penny, of the savings accumulating in the bottom of the cookie jar. Marie was convinced that they were financially able to begin farming.

Actually, they were not. But Hogan admired the young couple and had the deck loaded in their favor in the event favor became a necessity.

Oscar watched the proceedings with a somewhat similar frame of mind. "I got a little money," he muttered to himself, "to throw in there if those kids get in a fix where they need it."

When the jubilant Peter told him he would become Uncle Oscar in March, Oscar soon visited the Dahl's leading a present for the unborn baby. It was a newly freshened milk cow.

When the amazement of impending fatherhood was disclosed to Peter, he left his boyhood and became a man. All doubt of his ability to begin farming vanished.

In his preparation for the crop of next year, the usual rapid work rate became almost a frenzy. No broker was ever more analytical than was Peter in inspecting the machinery for sale at the various farm auctions.

In the rare visits to the village, Peter noticed that Marie and he were falling into the typical farmer procedure. While Marie shopped for groceries and dry goods, Peter joined the cluster on the board sidewalk. Farmer exchanged view with farmer on the most desirable method of preparing soil, harvesting or making the hay crop, and if there was a world not concerned with these things, it was not considered worthy of discussion.

When autumn had surrendered to the first hard snow of the winter season, the couple was able to sit back and find comfort in what had been accomplished. They had two horses and the cow from Oscar and owned an assortment of used farm machinery. By borrowing three additional horses from Hogan, Peter had been able to complete the fall plowing. Several factors were almost ignored in the pleasant review. Money in the cookie jar was almost depleted and they still needed more feed to bring their animals through the winter.

Human events are never motionless in any community. And it was Hogan who now furnished some interesting news. Since Oscar was available to care for his livestock, Hogan decided to go back east to visit some of his relatives and friends he had known in the old country. Oscar brought this news after he had plodded across fields now knee-deep in snow. The three young people decided it was nice Hogan could go back to visit some of his people. They would miss him during the Yuletide. "You couldn't have a better friend or neighbor than Hogan Olson," was Peter's summary.

When winter had progressed past the Yuletide, Marie and Peter came to a discovery. No amount of preparation will suffice when the rugged North Dakota winter decides to try the mettle of the isolated farmer. Peter, recalling lessons of his boyhood, had organized a trap line to add to the depleted wealth of the cookie jar. Now that King Winter was out in earnest, the little fur-bearing animals moved about seldom, and trapping was abandoned.

In the concern about the shortage of feed for their livestock, they forgot another important matter. They were nearly out of coal. Two days after struggling through snow drifts to the little village for coal, Peter had to repeat the ordeal to get kerosene for the lamp. These trips and rationing were beginning to show on the horses. Bones began to appear where only rolling flesh had been.

The Plains Indian, who had roamed during former centuries where Marie and Peter lived, named the winter season well. They called it "Ghost Face."

Marie and Peter were confused because their usually orderly planning seemed so inept. Neither realized that the responsibility was new to them. At the Schemel farm neither had considered such things as feed, coal, groceries or any of the countless provisions a farm requires. And on a bitterly cold night when Peter arose after midnight to throw more lignite coal into the heating stove, he concluded that maybe they had not yet seen an end to trouble. Marie, who had a head cold, seemed scarcely able to breathe.

When Peter lit the lamp, his alarm increased. Despite the chill of the room, Marie's face was flushed. To himself he said aloud, "What will I do now?"

"Maybe you should get a doctor, Pete," was the unexpected answer. Marie had not been asleep.

The severe winter had cancelled neighborly visits. Marie had received no feminine advice for weeks. Advice she had gotten was confusing and had never been sensibly pieced together. One pleasant farm woman had said, "When you first feel life, then it's time to see a doctor." To this had been added other admonitions. "If you don't feel life at the halfway mark, then it's time to see a doctor." Yet another instruction had been, "If morning sickness don't last over a month, you don't need a doctor until your first pains. And then only when they're coming five minutes apart."

Marie had planned to see a doctor on the Monday following the Christmas holiday. A three-day blizzard had delayed and then dulled this plan. The medic remained unsummoned, and to the misery of Marie's condition was added the even greater sickness of worry.

Worry was also in Peter's mind as he hitched up his horses for the trip to get the doctor. In his haste, he did not feel the usual concern for the skinny condition of his animals.

As the horses plunged in their effort to avoid the ever-changing snow drifts, Peter wondered how a country could look so good in summer and so terrible in winter.

Hands on Head

Oscar, under considerably less pressure, plodded methodically through his morning chores the next day and became uneasy. In the manner of prairie people, he habitually looked around to the farmhouses within view. He had grown accustomed to scanning the horizon for smoke rising from farmhouse chimneys.

Oscar had noticed no smoke coming from his brother's chimney. His first muttering had been "Marie an' Peter mus' be outa coal." Talking to himself, as farm people often do, he made a loud statement, "Peter ain't the kinda bird that will sit an' freeze. Hell, he'd chop that whole grove down if he hadda."

Alarm became action, so Oscar led one of Hogan's driving horses out of the barn and prepared to ride over to Peter's house to investigate.

Marie, meanwhile, had been dreaming. As the fire had been slowly dying out, she had once again been a little girl hiding in the snow to escape detection in childish play. The dream continued with her in the role of schoolmarm going to work on a cold winter morning questioning aloud why Peter didn't help her bundle up. He was more than just Schemel's hired man, he was her sweetheart. The crescendo of the illusion would be least pleasant. She was her mama's newest baby, lying on a snow-white blanket. But a bogeyman had grasped her and was shouting in her face. Hysterically, she wonders if that terrible face could be Oscar's.

Peter, rugged son of Nels Dahl, became acquainted with an age-old emotion – terror.

In town now, the doctor's wife patiently informed him that her husband would very likely return by dawn from his emergency visit south of the village. This news, unexpected but not terrifying, was accepted by the worried young man.

As he peered out of the warm little office observing the coming sunrise, Peter was almost flattened by a stray thought. What if the fire goes out in this cold weather an' Marie ain't well enough to fix it?

The doctor was not far from complete exhaustion when he started the trip with Peter. Peter's ill-concealed panic and his own realization of the power of a North Dakota winter provided the stimulant that kept him going.

When they came within sight of the little house, Peter's heart sank. He tried to drive the exhausted horses even faster. He saw no smoke rising from the chimney.

Peter had no way of knowing that Oscar's horse was in the barn. Drifting snow had long since erased tracks. He had no way of telling that the initial blast of black smoke had been dispelled and was followed by the undetectable exhaust of a clean burning flame.

When he and the doctor leaped from the sleigh without unhitching the puffing horses, they found Oscar ladling broth to a white-faced Marie.

"She's despondent," the doctor told Peter as they trudged out to the barn following the examination. Oscar had gone home to hastily finish his chores and take the doctor back to town with fresh horses.

"Would she have frozen if Oscar didn't come over?" Peter asked the doctor.

"Quite likely," was the reply. "Her head and chest are congested, and she'll need steaming. The baby seems to be all right but, frankly, it's not as vigorous as it might be. This is difficult to determine by such a hasty check, but I'm going only on what I'm told by your wife."

"Will they both be alright?"

"Your wife is a sturdy woman. How the baby does remains to be seen. No reason to give up hope, though. If you can get her in a more cheerful frame of mind, it will help."

Almost everywhere the exhausted doctor looked, there was something wrong in the way all his patients implemented good medical practice. He was often called upon to deliver a baby from a mother he'd never seen before. But the doctor knew that bitter criticism would not correct a past wrong. Unknown to all parties, it was still the dangerous time before true medical advances made myth-based health diagnoses obsolete.

The cold weather abated for a few days. Oscar brought a load of hay over from Hogan's supply, as he was distressed by the appearance of Peter's animals. Peter did not quite know how to look at this gesture. He asked Oscar if that wouldn't be stealing.

"We got plenty hay over there," Oscar explained. "I'll square up with Hogan. Someday you can square with me, if we happen to remember it."

Marie was improving under the considerate care she was receiving. Peter had absorbed the doctor's advice about raising Marie's spirits. He turned over his memory, while outdoors, to think of an amusing incident that might interest Marie. And in the process Peter found his own morale improving. The days were getting longer, and he congratulated himself upon the nearing end of winter. But "Ghost Face" was only resting up for a good blast.

Marie's first pains came during a night of howling wind and drifting snow.

They had no thermometer, but when Peter went out to hitch up the horses to fetch the doctor, he realized it must be mighty cold. On the way to the village, he swung his course to pass Hogan's farm. He and Oscar decided that action must be step one. The near tragedy had left a deep impression.

Oscar arose from his bed and began to care for his animals at three o'clock in the morning, so he could go and stay with Marie.

The doctor, with thorough inspection completed, had a surprise for them. Marie would not give birth for several days. It was only false labor. "Not too uncommon with the first one," he explained. "The effort is not wasted, though. Now we are all alerted. Next time there'll be nothing false about it."

Peter began to think it was impossible for things to go right. Oscar was uneasy. He had studied much about birth in his care of animals. The less fooling around, the better was the chance of healthy, natural birth.

Marie amazed them both. When her pains subsided, she put on a cotton dress and apron and busied herself with housework. She brought tasks into shape that Peter had neglected and insisted on preparing the meal for the puzzled brothers. Despite the lengthy illness, she was filled with buoyant energy.

Four days later, Peter was once again on his way to get the doctor. They were like old friends as they chatted all the way back to the tree claim. Peter was confident nothing could get too far out of hand at home with Oscar assisting there. The doctor, long a partner of pain and emergency, talked because he liked to. And he reasoned that the young man driving the horses had enough of grimness lately.

Had Peter and the doctor arrived a half hour later, they would have missed the birth. A perspiring Oscar was boiling water and talking to the worried Marie. Oscar had been going to the window every minute or two and had decided to deliver the baby himself when the sled came into sight.

A tiny cry like the meowing of a cat broke the silent suspense. Marie was so numbed by pain she scarcely heard it. Peter and Oscar were overjoyed.

'If this comes out all right, I'll forget this terrible winter,' was Peter's silent conclusion.

"It's a little boy!" the doctor announced.

But he was not smiling. And he kept cocking an ear to the tiny, wrinkled nose as they washed and oiled the baby in preparation to clothe him.

"I want you to keep the temperature in this house as steady as you possibly can," the doctor said. "Be sure you keep a container of water on the stove so your air doesn't get too dry." When the doctor had finished his task and was preparing to leave, he said, "I'll be back in a day or two."

Peter smiled. "That's nice of you, but it doesn't look like we'll need you."

"Need me or not, I'll drop back here," the doctor stated. And he did return, but not in time. Another birth needed him thirty miles from the Dahl home.

On the third day of his life, the infant son of Marie and Peter could no longer continue the difficult struggle to breathe and went to a world of less pain.

Now the little tree claim shanty became a scooped-out shell hole, whose raveling walls covered people's torn hearts and riddled hopes. The love that had brought Marie and Peter to the same bed seemed for a fleeting moment to have turned into a leering, repulsive ghost.

And on the evening of his son's death, Peter found they had no kerosene for the lamp.

So, he sat in the darkness, hands on head, as Marie moaned softly and rocked her dead boy.

After the burial, the recalcitrant weather began apologizing. But a sunny day could not clear away winter's gloom.

When Marie was able to leave her bed, she and her husband held a serious conference. Somehow, they had gotten on the wrong track, was the gist of it. Life was never meant to be this harsh. Farming, so energetically begun, was practically discarded in the discussion of plans. They wavered between returning to work at Schemel's and going to live at the house of Peter's grandfather in Minnesota. As the snowbanks began to change to streaming rivulets, no decision had been reached.

One evening, as Marie and Peter were clearing away the dishes, Oscar came stomping into the house carrying a big sack. Country folk did not make a spectacle of grief but preferred to allow a grieving person to talk it all out by himself. So, Oscar had not visited since the death of the baby.

"What's in the sack, Oscar?"

"My clothes," Oscar answered.

Peter was astonished. "You quit working for Hogan?"

"Yah, I had to."

"Why?" Marie and Peter echoed.

"Hogan got married las' winter an' I figure newlyweds should be alone."

"Then he's back with his wife?"

"Yah. I'm gonna work for him sometimes, but it's spring now, an' I wanna help you folks get your farmin' started too."

"But we aren't even goin' to stay here," Peter offered by way of explanation.

"Why?"

Peter looked at Marie and she returned his stare. Answer came to neither.

"I know you folks had a hellish winter," Oscar began, "an' me – sittin' over at Hogan's gettin' fat – has got little room to talk. But I'd like to tell you a story Grandma told me after Grandpa Hansen died."

19

The Money Panic

The captive audience neither assented nor declined, so Oscar began his tale. "Grandma pointed out the window to the grave you'n me dug, Peter, an' said, 'There's a man restin' easy in his grave. When your grandpa an' me came to this country the big loggers didn't want a small farmer clutterin' up the middle of their workins. It was only by accident we were able to buy the land. Back in those days it was more power than right or wrong, so the first house we put up got burned down one night. When we finally watched our buildings close enough, our haystack got burned. Nothing they'd say to Jens would get him to move, so they hired a couple big uglies to break Grandpa's arms and maybe convince him.

"Your Grandpa was real watchful when he was young. He surprised them fellas in the woods and split their heads open with a hardwood club. Pretty soon the companies begin to understand they weren't gonna get rid of Grandpa. If they killed him, he'd probably been back to haunt 'em. So, they begin to treat him all right.'"

The story was fascinating. There was not a sound as Oscar paused to take a chew of snuff. After a little deliberation, he began again.

"Grandma told me she often got mad at him, but even then, she was terrible proud of him. She said, 'Grandpa used to say that no country or no man would ever lick him.' An' when he set out to do a thing, he did it. Nothing this side o' heaven or hell would stop him.'"

There was a pause now, marked only by the steady breathing of the three young people.

"It might be true in your case," Oscar ventured. "You set out to farm an' if you let a bad winter lick you, you'll never be the same again."

Peter's daydreaming was broken. "Sweetheart," he said to Marie, "look up in the cookie jar an' see what's left of our money."

"Why?"

"I'm wonderin' if we got enough to buy a couple more horses."

Spring did not evaporate the winter's grief, but rather dulled it. Hard work is a marvelous therapy. And once again the little house knew laughter.

When Peter noticed the trees in the grove began budding, he lost much of the hopelessness of the winter and plunged into preparation for planting. Marie vowed her garden would be planted early, correct moon or no. The couple enjoyed having Oscar stay with them. He was no great conversationalist but provided a new face in evening lunch discussion.

One warm spring afternoon, the Dahls were honored by a visit from Hogan and his new wife. They brought along several brooding chicken hens and a basket of eggs. It was the new wife's gift to Marie and the beginning of the farm wife's standard sideline.

Hogan was filled with new incentive. He treated his middle-aged, fleshy wife like a newly-crowned queen. They giggled at each other in a manner that surprised Marie and Peter. Oscar, the most impartial of the group, was amused when the new love was later discussed. Less than a year previously, he had observed that Marie and Peter acted in a similar manner.

The first day of work in the fields was a memorable event. Both Marie and Peter worked in a serenade. Marie had a large washing on the line, absorbing beautiful sunshine.

The Meadowlark, possibly nature's most optimistic bird, had politely returned to the prairie. Peter looked away from his horses and reflected that the very spot his team had stumbled through six feet of drifted snow was now a playground for frolicking spring birds.

The Meadowlark survives winter inside a sturdy dome-shaped nest on the ground, woven expertly from stems, grasses and bark. The location is selected from a hoof print or small depression. Working together, the male gathers material while the female constructs the nest by herself, including the protective thatched roof and tunnel entrance leading to the shelter. Upon the emergence of spring, the Meadowlark comes back for another cycle of life that includes work, play, and courtship before returning to its winter stronghold.

As if a giant pendulum had abruptly changed direction, things started going favorably for the young couple.

Peter was elated when the green rows of his first crop started appearing. Joe Voss, poker player and philosopher, stopped by to compliment Peter on the tidy way he had seeded his emerging crop. From that day ever onward, Peter would tolerate no disparaging remark about Joe Voss.

Marie still had some doubts about reproduction. But she was thrilled when nearly all her gift eggs hatched. She studiously mixed corn meal and pulverized hard-boiled eggs to feed the new chicks. When absorbed in the lively

group of growing chicks, she felt they were each identifiable. The suddenly bursting garden, together with her chickens, amplified the sunshine.

Evening coffee and cookies provided the opportunity to review the day. Futility was being steadily replaced by a growing pride of accomplishment. One evening when Oscar was detained in helping Hogan, Peter sat quietly for several moments before addressing his wife.

"You know, Marie, I'm glad Oscar told us that little story when he did. Never again will I get a notion about backin' down."

"Storytelling is so unlike Oscar," Marie offered.

"Don't ever get it in your head that he's not intelligent, just because he ain't talkative," Peter answered gently.

"Oh, I don't mean that at all," Marie protested. "I got a funny feeling when Oscar was tellin' us that story."

"Like what?"

"Like it wasn't Oscar talkin' at all. It was cold, but a warm breeze blew right through me. Though I never knew him, I shut my eyes an' coulda swore it was your tough ol' Grandpa Hansen talkin' to us."

"Anyhow," Marie concluded, "I'm glad we stuck it out."

The green prairie was kindly disposed in 1907. Peter walked carefully through the fields, plants well above his boot tops. He was going to inspect some native prairie hay land, as the haying season would soon come. When he came to the end of a field, he crossed the rusty barbed wire fence and stood in the clay road, surveying the beauty about him. He thought he detected a rattling sound far up the road.

It was Joe Voss in his Ford.

A wisp of blue smoke drifted from under the car when it finally stopped. Joe had not noticed Peter until he was nearly broadside. He had to avoid coasting well past young Dahl.

"Crops are lookin' good," Peter offered in greeting.

"That's true, that's true," responded Joe.

"Hope it's as good as last year," Peter cheerfully added.

"Accordin' to what I hear in town, it won't be," Joe volunteered.

"How can anyone tell yet?"

"Pete, we may come up with a helluva crop an' get nothin' for it. We got a money panic on."

"Money panic, what's that?"

"I ain't exactly sure. Somethin' gets outa whack, I guess. The bird without a dollar starts worryin' to beat hell sixty, an' the one with a dollar jams it 'way back in his sock, so's it won't up an' fly away."

Peter reflected on this new development while he chewed on a green wheat stalk. "Joe, this is my first crop an' it's kinda special. If I can't sell it, I'll pile it up in the yard an' jus' sit home an' look out the window at it."

"That ain't too bad a way to look at it," Joe judged. "Us farmers stick on this damn prairie long enough, she may pan out. A little good moon an' poker helps while yer waitin'."

The money panic was indeed cause for concern. Neighbors discussed it whenever chance meetings draped them on separating fence lines. Peter received a letter from his parents saying work on Minnesota's Mesabi iron ore range was halted in the middle of the day. Mines had been shut down and miners sent home immediately upon the receipt of the alarming news from the eastern headquarters. Tools were left lying exactly where worried workmen dropped them. It was an awesome and puzzling thing, but only a minor squall in comparison with an economic event on the distant horizon.

A farmer's wealth is not limited to what he can hold in his hand or carry in his wallet, so Peter and Oscar gradually began to ignore the money panic.

As the season progressed, the accumulating haystacks that dotted the prairie took on more significance than mere money. The young men had not forgotten how thin Peter's livestock had been the preceding spring.

Preparing for the harvest became the major problem of the day. Peter bought an old grain binder which took days of reconditioning, helping its chance for survival in the coming battle of harvest.

Oscar worked intermittently on surrounding farms and his coming and going was unannounced and unpredictable. One warm evening he came into the yard leading a young, reddish, white-faced cow.

"Whose cow you got there?" Peter questioned.

"Mine," was the answer, "or ours. Anyway, she belongs to the place."

"Looks like one o' them Herefords from Sweisser's herd," Peter speculated.

"It ain't! This here is a bred heifer. She's registered an' I got the papers in my shirt pocket."

Knowing Oscar would further discuss the purchase only when he was so disposed, Peter kept on repairing his binder canvas. When Oscar had released his heifer to the companionship of Peter's cow, he stood leaning on a fence post gazing at his new purchase until dark.

What he was looking at was the beginning of a noteworthy herd of quality cattle.

As only he saw it, no one was any the wiser.

The Growing Twenties

The three young people had adopted an old prairie evening diversion. It was a card game called whist. Busy summer days seldom left time for leisure, but once or twice a week Joe would stop by after the heat of the day and in his own language, "Ster up a game o' cards."

Joe Voss was an excellent student of card playing. He pointed out the value of accurate bidding and evaluation. An old theory of his was that husband and wife should not play as partners since they had enough to argue about anyhow. Consequently, Marie and he usually opposed the brothers.

Peter and Oscar would often pause in the day's work to talk over a particularly clever play made in a past session. Joe was an expert and Marie an apt pupil, so it was only by analysis and critique that Peter and Oscar had anything like even odds. It followed that the discussions of the brothers were more often how they had been beat, rather than how they had won.

The year's harvesting was less than a week old when Peter decided to work later than usual to finish cutting down a field of oats. He was alarmed when he reached the little house and found Marie slumped in a chair weeping softly. His first thought was that Marie had become chagrined by the delay in the evening meal. He began proper apologies but was assured that his tardiness was not the cause of the grief. Thoroughly puzzled, Peter said quietly, "What is the trouble?"

"I'm pregnant again," was the muffled reply.

Peter slumped to his chair, leaving the supper untouched. He recalled that he was in the same chair facing the same direction as when he first sat mourning the death of his son.

Oscar had been in the field of oats setting up the bundled grain in shocks. There was much youth and power in him. Reminding himself the purebred Hereford and her calf would be eating some of the golden kernels, he was loath to leave his work and went in later than Peter. When he strode into the little house, he found the same deep gloom he had known several months before.

"Is it a funeral goin' on in here?" he asked, peering through the lengthening shadows.

"Marie is goin' to have a baby," was the hushed explanation.

Oscar began eating his supper in the silence and seemed to be absorbed in thought.

"Reminds me of one time when I was a kid," he offered, his voice booming in the little house.

"I was walkin' through the woods back home an' come on a doe. There was a sickness of some kind in deer that spring and some of 'em dropped their fawn. This one was standin' by her dead baby studyin' a long time. This doe had a slash of white crossways on her breast an' I got so I felt I was acquainted with her. When it come milkin' time I hadda go home an' when I got up the doe got scared off. I forgot about it altogether until a year later. I was over on the north end of Grandpa's pasture one day and I see a doe and two fawn go across the clearin' hell bent for election.

"I whistled and they stopped. This doe turned around wettin' her nose an' sniffin'. It was my ol' friend, the doe with the crosswise slash o' white on her breast. She had two o' the prettiest fawns with her you ever saw."

Oscar seldom told a story. When he did, he received rapt attention. After a few minutes of silence, the house came once again to its quiet hum of life.

"One good thing about it, there'll be nice weather when it comes," Marie said, wiping her eyes carefully with her apron.

"The doc is goin' to be in on this first time I have a chance to get to town," Peter analyzed the situation.

"Let's light the lamp," Oscar suggested, "an' play a couple hands o' that whist – three handed."

And thus came the first knowledge that Peter would do the gardening when the next spring came, and Oscar would have the task of rearing little chicks.

For on Norwegian Independence Day, the seventeenth of May, a wiggly, noisy little daughter was born to Marie.

Peter was to explain years later to Oscar, when his children were led to mischief by the eldest, the resulting punishment was accepted like a Spartan, "She's a living example of Norwegian independence."

Man has tried to give periods of time a specific name. The 1920s have been referred to as the "Roaring Twenties." Time is many things to many people, and to the increasing Dahl family, a more fitting name would have been the "Growing Twenties."

Before the decade was finished, Marie had once again assumed command of the garden and the chickens. Attention to her task was divided somewhat by the presence of four helpers. Inquisitive little fingers sometimes

uprooted a row of plants to see what grew on the bottom. It was a task worthy of Marie's teaching experience to explain why some food grew above the ground and others grew beneath its surface.

Marie, who once thought she was done with teaching, found she had hardly begun. On a spring afternoon, she found dozens of eggs in her oven when she went to inspect the warm loaves of bread. Her oldest son had been told that the warmth of the hen-hatched eggs would become little chicks. He had reasoned that greater heat would reduce the time element, and though the experiment was interrupted by his mother, he did try a new dish during the following meal – baked eggs.

Discipline was not a commodity to be brought out on occasion and put back into hiding when a lighter mood occurred – but was as much a part of the little home as the kitchen table. Discipline was not used so it became a dirty word. Marie and Peter agreed that if an individual is to respect his fellow being, it must start somewhere. The most logical start would involve this first acquaintance, his parents. A separate yet interwoven conclusion was reached. Discipline, through respect, could not be commanded or bought, but had to be earned.

When an elementary school teacher told Marie that her children learned well because they were well-mannered, Marie ignored the connection. Later discussion over coffee proved that Oscar was the only one of the three who saw any logic in the statement.

"That stands to reason," he summed it up, "you couldn't teach a horse anything unless you got him to stand still and listen."

Peter, meanwhile, had become a landowner. He had purchased a quarter section of land – one hundred sixty acres – adjacent to the tree claim on a crop payment arrangement. Three good years in succession made the land his, free and clear.

Peter's wish was to begin a similar proposition which would allow him to buy the tree claim, but Hogan had no immediate desire to sell. It was understood that Peter and Oscar would have an unwritten option if the time ever came that the tree claim would change ownership.

There was only one reason for Hogan to retain possession of the tree claim. He and his wife were trying to adopt a child. They had met with a series of frustrations. Adoption authorities of the day had to be fully convinced that the prospective relationship was not motivated by a desire for slave labor. Events like that had been known to occur and as is sometimes the case, an evil person had caused many sincere people to come under suspicious scrutiny. Had Hogan and his wife been successful, some lad would have been very fortunate. The tree claim would have been reserved for him the first day he stepped into the little farmhouse.

Oscar was not idle during the Twenties either. His herd was growing continuously. The registered Hereford became a senior matron in the increasing herd. Unpracticed eyes would find the cattle identical in appearance, but Oscar could pick out his first cow at a quarter mile with ease. Within the land Peter owned was a plot of pasture where the Herefords spent the summers. Every evening Oscar would walk down the clay road to look over his herd. It became a sort of ritual. Even if he had mended fences all afternoon near his herd, it did not eliminate the evening visit.

The ritual had several sides. Peter's oldest daughter went with Oscar on her first trip when she was scarcely able to walk. Two summers later she was too mature for such childish things and her brother became Oscar's companion on the inspection. The little boy was in turn replaced by his younger sister. Each child was proud to go with Oscar to look at the herd. Each was also proud to progress past that honor and relinquish it to a younger member of the family.

Roger, the youngest, made the evening trips until he was nearly seven. The older children teased him beyond this symbol of babyhood. Shortly after his seventh birthday, Roger soberly told his uncle that since he was nearly grown up, he thought it proper that he remain home in the yard and take part in the nightly kittenball game. From that evening on, Oscar sometimes missed the inspection and sat instead on the front porch watching the game.

The schoolmarm dropped in at regular intervals to visit Marie during the yearly term. Since Marie had once been a teacher there was a strong common ground for association and friendship. The schoolmarm was well past girlhood and thus did not mingle extensively with the courting and giggling set in the community.

"We're going to have a change in the weather," she ventured to Marie and Peter. It was late fall, and it seemed as if winter had forgotten its annual chores.

"How can you tell?" asked Peter. "You have a barometer?"

"I have a room full of them," she replied, grinning.

"You mean the kids?" Marie questioned.

"Yes," the schoolmarm replied. "I've noticed that when the children get unusually active and aggressive traits seem magnified, there's invariably a storm or a decided weather change approaching."

"My Grandfather told me the same thing about the creatures in the woods," Peter offered, "but I laid it to the fact he was getting to where his mind was wandering."

"Peter," Marie said reproachfully, "what an impolite thing to say." Peter and the schoolmarm burst into laughter.

"I wasn't making a comparison or intending any offense," Peter chuckled. "I just now decided maybe Grandpa has something there."

21

Twenty-Dollar Bills

The three speculators sat discussing the influence of climate on human behavior while consuming a large pot of coffee. The schoolmarm and Peter made observations on some of the unusual events of past travel. Marie, who had traveled little, helped in analysis. The schoolmarm's most impressive contribution was that she had been out west during a vacation and had experienced an earthquake scare. She had noticed that the tension had caused a lifelong friend to quarrel bitterly over some triviality.

As the hour grew later, the schoolmarm remembered that social standard would compel her to leave. For the sum of eighty-two dollars a month she had to have, among many things, impeccable conduct and could not stay out late at night.

Peter had been considering an idea for several months, but indecision on how to express himself had kept the thought within him. He sensed that the opportune moment had arrived and so he addressed the schoolmarm, "You know, there's something I had in mind to mention. I hope I can get it out right so it won't sound like I'm cracked. It's about our kids."

The audience remained at the table. Marie was curious since Peter usually was not hesitant about disclosing what was on his mind. The schoolmarm had a glimmering that the session would soon be out of order. She was, however, mistaken.

"Go ahead, talk," Marie directed.

"It's like this," Peter continued, aiming his remarks to the schoolmarm.

"Nowhere have Marie and I got a more interesting friend or one we appreciate more. What worries me is that unbeknownst to yourself, our kids might get more advantage in school than they got comin'. You're honest and fair, but people are people, and I figured it's possible you might see a lot of Marie in one of our kids and favor him or her without even noticing it. Only they aren't going to meet all people like you in this world. I hope you don't think about Marie when one of the kids gets outta line. Often in this world it ain't what's done, it's who done it."

"I'll remember that, Peter, and I think I'll always cherish it." The schoolmarm took her leave.

The United States Weather Bureau missed another prediction, but the schoolmarm didn't. Cold weather came blasting down from the wilderness region of Canada. It came the same morning that Peter had to go to town for provisions. What Peter wanted most in the little village was to get a spare battery for an incredible object they had acquired after the golden harvest. It was a gadget called a radio.

The radio had made an enormous change in the long winter evenings. It caused cold weather to be welcomed. As temperatures dropped, the ever-present problem of static became lessened. Often a cold snap made it possible to receive a new and strange station late at night. Radio marked the widespread beginning of the amazing thirty-day offer, which might be retracted at any time if the supply became exhausted. Marie could ill afford to dally in sending her dollar for the astonishing liquid additive that made hens want to lay more eggs. The nation became product conscious, and the Dahl children made an eloquent plea to their parents for a change in breakfast food. They wanted to share eating habits with a certain little urchin on the radio whose life was a fascinating series of ups and downs.

Cold weather had yet another distinction. It signaled the lighting of fire in the little lean-to heating stove. An addition had been built to the tree claim home. It was a lean-to, securing maximum room at minimum outlay. A partition ran through the middle of it and ended in a hallway where stood the small heating stove. One of the rooms had been designated as Oscar's, the other was sleeping quarters for the two little boys. There was a large, draped archway where the addition met the original structure and only during intense cold weather was it necessary to utilize the auxiliary heat of the small stove.

Since improved radio reception and cold weather – along with a fire in the lean-to stove – occurred simultaneously, little Roger once told his fellow listeners during a particularly bothersome period of static that the only solution was to get a fire going in the little stove. The incident became a private family joke. Someone invariably offered Roger's solution when reception was poor, even though it might be during midsummer.

The boys' bedroom became, as occasion demanded, police headquarters, rustler's hideout or the scene of a showdown meeting between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Oscar's room was both an office and library. He patiently bound copies of the Dakota Farmer and various cattle breeder's publications into their respective volumes with store string and darning needle. Peter chuckled at the habit, reminded him of his father who did likewise with the Decorah Posten, a Norwegian-American newspaper.

Oscar's bedroom served as another institution. It was also a treasury. In the unique and unwritten financial arrangement between the brothers, Oscar received a sum of cash each fall. Marie and Peter would go over the farm's earnings and overhead annually and Oscar's share of profit would be among the determinations. Oscar would receive a brown envelope with his share in twenty-dollar bills. Finance held little appeal for Oscar, so he

habitually tossed the envelope in his trunk along with the registration papers applying to his cattle. Oscar knew how many head of livestock he owned but was never sure as to how much money he possessed.

Peter was astounded when he brought his horses in for the noon meal one sunny spring day. The horses kicked up a twenty-dollar bill of the large type that had been replaced several years previously. He picked it up and examined it, turning to Oscar who also was entering the barn.

"I figured times were pretty good, Oscar, but looks like now we got money growing right in the grass."

"Must even be comin' out with the horse manure, Peter. Here's a twenty-dollar bill laying in the back end of King's stall."

Further search while feeding the horses turned up no more of the monetary bonanza, but the brothers grinned at each other as they strode to the house. Before they reached their destination, tiny suspicions began forming. When a man could pick up money so easily, something must be out of whack. They had nearly reached the house when a frantic Marie burst through the screen door.

"Where are those two little ones?"

"Ain't they in for dinner?" Peter asked.

"No, the biggest two are, but the little ones are gone," Marie said, gasping.

"Nothin' to get alarmed about," Oscar offered.

"Don't you see, Oscar," Marie wailed, "they've been in your trunk. I just now found that out. No tellin' what they dragged off."

The Dahl brothers looked at each other. Sickly grin was met with one even more foolish.

Little Eleanor and Roger were found sitting in the shade of a straw shock behind the barn. They had been much impressed by their radio heroine's brush with bank robbers. Reenactment of the story had been stymied by lack of something to use for money. Little Roger came from a long line of practical men. He told his little sister, "I think I know where we can get some money, only we'll have to bring it back."

Dinner was forgotten in the worried treasure hunt. Since Oscar didn't know how much he had originally, no one could know when the task was completed. Peter and Oscar, remembering their pleasure at finding the first two bills, were strangely silent.

The question of discipline arose. Oscar sheepishly said, "It's really my fault. I could just as well a' locked that trunk."

"No, sir," Peter replied. "We shouldn't have to lock anything in that house." He assembled the children and explained how Oscar's privacy had been invaded. The two offenders were sent to their rooms for the remainder of the day. The little tykes didn't mind the isolation so much, but it was pure hell to miss the excitement of the search.

Later, while eating the reheated dinner, the brothers laughed quietly.

"Think we found 'em all, Oscar?" was Peter's question.

"Yah, we must have. If there's any more, they'll turn up," Oscar replied.

"You know," Peter began, "I think I found out something."

"What's that?"

"Don't believe I'll ever trust sudden prosperity again."

People of the United States of America, spawned originally from the most intrepid of the entire world, are normally optimistic expansionists. A visitor can literally breathe that truism. The enthusiasm of the late Twenties had drifted across the nation and some of the pollen had fallen on the prairie.

Peter had enlarged the garden two years in succession. Whenever Marie bought a cooking utensil it was invariably larger than the discarded one. Whereas a load of wheat once bought the children's winter clothing, the requirement grew past two loads. Peter, maturing to the point where he considered tomorrow, knew that he would have to produce more cash crops to provide for his household. This conviction was strengthened by the prevailing spirit of the nation, which held that while it was still not quite possible to get something for nothing, it was a time when much could be obtained for little. Recent years had seemed to bear out that reasoning. The prairie was filled with tales of how this or that go-getter had made a stake during a summer, lost it gambling in winter vacation, and made it back again with the next season's crop.

Marie noticed that her lively husband did not answer as promptly as usual. He was absent-minded and several times came in late from field work. When Peter had the plan nearly formed, he tested his reasoning on his wife, and they lay awake most of the night talking over the future in muffled tones. Marie arose in the early dawn to check the bank book once again. She realized the following day why Peter had been so absorbed. The children thought she had suddenly become hard of hearing.

Peter was a good planner. So good that he recognized the old axiom that two heads are sometimes better than one.

Marie had altered the plan and left her mark on it.

22

Buy More Land

The money of theirs in the bank was adequate to make a sizable payment on a small farm, and Peter had figured they should withdraw it and attempt to buy the tree claim. Marie felt she had a better idea. She thought they should sell the quarter section of land they already owned to Oscar and retain their savings for further expansion in the future. The nature of the land in question made it more adaptable for Oscar's cattle than for Peter's grain raising. Peter mulled over this proposal for several days and saw logic in it.

So, the planners decided the time had come to negotiate with Oscar. The task fell, naturally, to Peter, since Oscar was not an easy man to convince. Peter had expected some opposition, but the terror of it took him by complete surprise.

"I don't care to own anything," was Oscar's response when the dealing got underway.

"But that's not natural," Peter stated.

"For me it's natural. Here's the way I see it, Peter. I'm real happy the way she's goin' now. Only thing I got my name on paper is the registration of my cattle. If I croak tonight, they go to you an' Marie, an' be no red tape to it. With land it's different. You go ahead an' own all you want. I know we'll never have any trouble about who uses what. I'll work with you an' raise my cattle. We're partners, but in the eyes of the law, it's you an' Marie who are partners. If one o' you dies, the other is left with the property, an' the kids will make out. If you both die, I'll raise them kids if I have to stand on my head to do it."

Peter had thought the problem through with thoroughness, but this response was unconsidered. He knew that he had to present his case to Oscar in a way that would somehow counteract this reasoning. Oscar could be convinced, but not by half-hearted measures. So, Peter decided to skip the preliminaries and get right down to the meat of the situation.

"Here's the point we're comin' to, Oscar," he began.

"We're getting' cramped. Your herd is growing' to where we can hardly get enough hay for 'em. I need all the crop land we're usin' an' then some to keep the family goin'. If we swing this deal an' I no longer have to share the crop on the tree claim, we both benefit. Not only that, we can both do as we damn please. You can make a

ranch outta that quarter where you got summer pasture, and I can farm this tree claim exactly like I wantta. Couldn't be a finer landlord than Hogan Olson, but it still ain't the same as ownin'."

Oscar considered the merit of the proposition for several days.

Finally, one evening after the children were in bed, he told Marie and Peter that he was willing to go along with the plan. He was, however, adamant on one point. Legal ownership was not to be changed. Word of mouth agreement was all he would accept. When he went to his trunk to bring in his accumulation of wealth, all three were amazed. Oscar had consistently sold off his purebred bull calves as there was no other logical way out of the predicament. He had not the heart to castrate the animals and, since he bred cattle along family lines, he could do nothing else but dispose of the surplus male animals.

Step one completed, the planners directed their attention to Hogan.

Peter suggested they wait until such time as Hogan and his wife would come over for a visit. This was not an infrequent occasion, since the proposed adoption of a child had met with failure. But in a looser sense, Hogan and his bride had adopted the four children who romped around the tree claim.

Marie had sized up the situation and been convinced that Hogan would sell them the desired land. Peter was not so sure. He couldn't imagine anyone being willing to sell land. Marie's analysis was that both Hogan and his wife were getting on in years and seemed to prefer raising turkeys and flowers more than the strenuous challenge of dirt farming.

A woman, who often thinks with her heart and calls it intuition, frequently does a better job than a man who likes to believe he thinks with his head. When Peter broached the subject to Hogan, it almost seemed as if Marie had supplied Hogan with an answer. And after several weeks of legal formalities, the big switch was made. The plan had been conceived and executed as smoothly as a shock of grain was formed when the bundles were uniform and properly placed.

When Peter returned from the county seat with documents in order, he speculated on when he had ever felt so good. He told himself it was either when he first found that Marie loved him, or it was when his oldest daughter was born. Marie joined him in the jubilant spirit. Together they tiptoed through the little bedrooms to admire their sleeping brood. "You know something, Marie?" Peter whispered. "It wouldn't be near this much fun if we didn't have this gang here to eat up the profits."

Several evenings later, when Oscar returned from inspecting his cattle, he brought with him some unusual news. Joe Voss had stopped his auto briefly and shouted that the stock market in New York crashed. The visit had been

brief and Oscar retained little of the facts. He felt some concern, however, since he was a cattleman and naturally did not like to see his counterpart in New York state have difficulties.

While Marie brewed the evening coffee, she explained to Oscar that livestock were not involved. Tom Wood had told Peter of the investment world many years ago while they were boyish lumberjacks. So, Oscar breathed a sigh of relief when he finally understood the situation and concluded it was relatively unimportant.

And much of the prairie shared Oscar's view. A farmer who dashed over hundreds of acres with shoestring finance was very likely to assert that those New York gamblers deserved their fate. A rumor floated around that a certain livery stable owner had lost eighteen thousand dollars in the crash. Very few believed this fantasy. Why would a man send his money to New York when there was still land left to buy? Old-timers, observers of previous panics, told listeners that this financial event would impact the prairie in a year or two and last possibly six months or a year. The matter was soon disregarded.

In the cold months that followed, Peter and Oscar engaged in a new diversion. As they ambled about the barn caring for their livestock, each in turn told of plans for his land. There was subdued pride in them as they discussed possible subdivision of a field and the adaptability of a given crop to a specific field. An entire day could easily be devoted to the background and potentiality of one modest chunk of land. They had not had so much to talk about since hobo days.

When the first of the migratory fowl started to appear and the snow was nearly gone in the grove of trees, a snag developed in the discussions. The Dahl brothers came to a joint conclusion. They had more plans than they had land. And, of course, there was only one sensible solution.

Peter still had money in the bank. Oscar's trunk treasury was not fully consumed, despite the past year's dealing. They decided they would buy more land and, having reached that decision, wondered why they hadn't thought of it sooner.

Peter had no little difficulty making Marie realize the value of the budding plan. She had been in favor of the original purchase but felt they should consolidate their gains before going on to bigger things. The trend of times was contrary to her reasoning, Peter pointed out. Greatest success had continually gone to the unworried go-getter. The fact that conservative Oscar counted himself in had sufficient weight to eventually convince Marie. When the trio was unified in decision, the probable steps in the plan came under consideration.

It was agreed that a policy of watchful waiting would be best. The land had to be in the nearby vicinity to be desirable. To go out and actively seek land would be to immediately raise the asking price. The prairie grapevine was always active and any news that would apply to the sale of land was analyzed during the evenings. When several months had passed and the prospects appeared constantly dimmer, Joe Voss imparted some news that got

the three planners into conference. A half section, or three hundred twenty acres, located to the north was up for sale.

The policy of watchful waiting came to an end. Investigation brought out the fact that an agent in the little village to the north was handling the sale. Peter kicked the tires of his Model T in preparation for the trip to see the land agent. He had planned to trade for the newer Model A, but when the land purchase idea struck, money was allocated for nothing else.

As the brothers made the trip north, they already were making plans for the new land. When they located the land agent, they found they would have to muster every dollar they had to make the required initial payment. There were some other stipulations. The money had to be in hard cash. The agent would accept no "earnest money" and said that the down payment would be the only thing that could sew up the deal for the Dahl brothers. All these requirements were somewhat unique and were demanded because the land agent had some understanding of the then-precarious national economy. Peter and Oscar, amateurs at bargaining, saw nothing out of place. Nor did Marie. When they discussed the terms of the deal, they agreed that any seller was entitled to his own little peculiarities.

Another trip became necessary. Peter, needing cash, had to go to town to secure his money. The land agent required cash, and that's what it would have to be.

When he presented his little deposit book and requested the withdrawal, the banker appeared edgy.

"You in Grand Forks yesterday?" he asked Peter.

"Nope," was the reply.

"Devils Lake?"

"Nope, I was up north," Peter informed the questioner. When Peter left the bank, he was somewhat nervous himself. He was unaccustomed to carrying any sizable amount of money.

The evening business conference in the little kitchen was a pleasant one. Counting and rechecking proved they had enough money to buy the land they now desired even more fervently. And on the following morning, Peter and Oscar, equal partners in the venture, were scheduled to return to the land agent with the first payment.

But sleep would not come to Oscar that night.

He kept recalling an incident of his long-ago hobo days. It had happened in Huron or maybe Pierre, South Dakota. A group of carefree wanderers had been assembled in a boxcar listening to Tom Wood and the Professor discuss the oddities of the prairie farmer.

Oscar wasn't sure he retained the entire sense of the talk, but what he did remember made him uneasy.

He decided to check with Peter in the morning but remained awake all night.

23

Do Some Fencing

During breakfast, Oscar asked Peter if he recalled Tom's advice. Peter tweaked his nose several times, trying to bring the discussion back to memory.

"You mean, when he said farmers all seem to want the same things at the same time?" Peter asked.

"What else do you remember about it?"

"Tom Wood said that when farmers decide to buy something, they act so much in a group that what they want takes on a falsely high value. When they don't want something, that thing gets an unnaturally low value. Tom said the way to get along best is to act opposite of the herd."

"Looks like we fell right into the pattern Tom was talkin' about," Oscar explained.

"Every farmer you see is takin' more land. And land's been goin' up in price for years now. Appears we're on the wrong track, Peter."

The land agent, precise with his demand, lost his clients. Oscar was convinced the move was wrong. Doubt had also been planted in the minds of Marie and Peter. As the conversation droned along, their arguments became weaker. Marie was the first to capitulate. She had been less enthusiastic than the men throughout the entire proceedings. She felt a new concern and gave voice to her thoughts.

"We can't have this money stored here in the house. It made me feel spooky all last night. I'd feel better if you put your money in the bank too, Oscar."

"Why should he do that?" Peter asked.

"If we were to have a fire, it would be much better if there wasn't a bunch of money to worry about. Be one less thing to try to save," Marie stated.

After talking the idea over, Oscar agreed to accompany Peter to town the next day and deposit his money also. He saw little necessity for so doing but was agreeable only because it might help compensate for his stubbornness in backing down on the land deal. When the brothers went back to their tasks, Peter told his wife to make out a list if she wanted anything from the village the following morning.

Peter and Oscar were in no hurry as they made the trip to town in the morning. Bankers, it seemed, were notoriously late risers. It was midmorning when they chugged into the village. As they parked the automobile, they noticed an unusually large number of people on the sidewalks of the little village. The brothers thought there must have been an accident, but as there were numerous clusters of overalled farmers present, they had to dismiss this possibility. It wasn't likely that many accidents could happen at once.

But an accident had occurred.

It was of a magnitude that was not readily understood. The bank had closed its doors and was not open for business, regardless of the nature of that business.

The first farmer Peter met shouted, "The bank is busted!"

Peter and Oscar felt cautiously for their respective rolls of bills, fearful lest this astonishing event had caused them to mysteriously evaporate.

There was anguish on the rough plank sidewalk, and an oddly exhilarating feeling among those who had lost nothing. The bank crash had been a gigantic equalizer, since all had been wiped out, placing so many things ahead of money.

Behind the barricaded door, the banker sat weeping into his handkerchief. The scene was duplicated all over the prairie, only the actors were different.

Individual degree of banker responsibility in the event ranged from complete innocence to downright complicity. Reaction varied from devastation to feigned indifference.

Before Peter and Oscar recovered from the impact of the stunning news, they began to share a guilty feeling. Neither mentioned the fact that they had escaped the crash. And when they felt out of spirit with the angry mob, they climbed back into the Model T and whisked out of town. The grocery list remained in Peter's shirt pocket, forgotten.

Marie was irritated when the men returned empty-handed. When told of the event, she also forgot about groceries. As the three of them sat sipping coffee in the kitchen, each silently thought over the shocking experience.

"I'm mighty thankful you got the notion you did," Peter told his brother.

"Don't thank me," Oscar replied, "it's Tom who should get the credit."

"It's one thing to get good advice," Marie observed, "and quite another to be lucky enough to pay heed to it."

When the refreshment was finished, they strolled into Oscar's room to make the deposit that had been intended for the surprisingly collapsed bank.

The fever of land buying had made the occupants of the tree claim oblivious to what was going on in the outside world. The smoothly rising standard of living that was typical of the Twenties had lulled them into a belief that the climb was endless. Evidence to the contrary began to appear. Transactions in land dried up except for, of course, mortgage foreclosures.

Several young students in their early teens, participants in the 4-H program, had purchased calves from Oscar. The project required bookkeeping so the youthful farmers could report the profit or loss involved. All but one had to report a loss. The one exception showed a hairline profit due to good fortune in securing some low-priced feed.

Oscar's accounting procedure was not nearly so complete, but he realized he was steadily going backward. Formerly, he had entertained buyers from upper Midwest states. Month followed month, and no one showed interest in acquiring good livestock. The time came when a mature animal was worth less than ten dollars, and Oscar was caught between two fires. He couldn't accumulate enough feed to winter all the expanding herd, and it was sheer torture to sacrifice the fine livestock for the prevailing price.

The small crop man fared equally as bad. In many cases he would have been a winner had he hoarded his feed instead of planting it. A farmer will till the soil despite hell or high water, so Peter went through the seasonal routine, knowing he would lose less by planting less. He was also faced by a perplexing, continuous problem.

Farm power and machinery had begun to make a significant change. It appeared that the horse was on the way out. The farmer who retained his horses often netted little more than enough to feed his beasts. His counterpart, who availed himself of mechanical progress, often made insufficient profit to continue his payments, and thus could well be left without horse or tractor. Newly harvested wheat dropped in price to approximately twenty-five cents per bushel, and further debate on horses or tractors became pointless. A farmer couldn't make expenses by either method.

Nature, possibly bored with the struggle, decided to take a more active part in it. Man did not understand all he knew about farming, and it was coincidence that nature would choose the Great Depression to illustrate this fact.

A new phase was born – Dust Bowl. A cycle of disastrous action and reaction became known and the farmer's errors – past and present – caught up with him in a vast, howling cloud of dust.

The optimism of the Twenties did not add much to genuine agricultural knowledge. Farming was a slam-bang, devil-take-the-hindmost affair. Conservation was only a word in the dictionary. Man initiated the action when he pulverized large areas and depleted subsoil moisture by constant cropping. Reaction was inevitable. The first extensive drought made the prairie a vast ash pile. A wind which would have gone unnoticed a quarter century previously brought with it despair and took away the priceless topsoil. When a damaging dust storm seemed to invite one of even greater intensity, only despair was left.

The painful reaction was not only apparent in flying clouds of dust. The prairie lost something infinitely more valuable than its topsoil. Many of its youth, observing futility in all directions, decided any enterprise would beat agriculture.

Throughout America's history, population shifts through regional exodus have occurred and will continue. But seldom has been evidenced such a scattering of craftsmen of so many varied occupations.

The Dust Bowl, like the Great Depression, left its mark on all it encountered. It is more than idle speculation that, between them, they created a spawning bed for what later became known as the "great American search for security."

Peter and Oscar mulled over the plight they found themselves in. At first it seemed there was no deed that could turn out favorably. Confusion preceded reasoning, but since people become more communicative with disaster, several interesting theories were advanced.

Joe Voss, Hogan Olson, and the neighbor Peterson visited with greater frequency. All were in accord on one point – they would tough it out regardless of outcome. A conviction began to emerge. Maybe they had been farming wrong. They envisaged a plan wherein livestock and crop could be blended more favorably. Joe Voss ceased field operations and said he'd realize a new farm if he let a little grass and weeds grow.

The federal government offered much in the way of helpful advice. A great deal of learning was dissipated by the fact that a horse led to water may choose to remain thirsty. A sturdy American farmer was a hard-headed breed and often concluded that some snot-nosed punk from a college couldn't possibly know much about farming.

Peter and Oscar absorbed enough of the newer ideas to reach a conclusion. They decided to do some fencing and integrate their separate operations. Peter was delegated to go to the village to select the fencing material.

A new rumor made the rounds of the prairie establishment. That farmer who had seen the crash coming and withdrawn all his money from the bank was doing a curious thing. He was buying fence in large quantities. Farmers stirred uneasily in the newly opened taverns following the repeal of Prohibition.

Obviously, the right thing to do was to buy fence. Most of them saw no apparent reason but, after all, these fellows had seen the crash coming.

Cavern of Knowledge

Peter, reflecting more with greater maturity, thought quite often of Tom Wood. He remembered the admonishing about being contrary to the herd. What had been true in the past quite likely was still true, only in reverse. Nothing agricultural had any value. If the condition continued, there was no future for anyone. In all probability, things could only go one way from the bottom. That had to be up. He began to talk about the feasibility of buying land. Although they could scrape up little cash during the depression, that factor was not a great deterrent. Confidence was of far greater desirability. The amount of cash needed to enter an agreement was ridiculously small.

Late-evening planning sessions were revived. It was agreed that Peter and Oscar would each contribute half the money and become joint partners. Land was now readily available. Many a potential empire had crumbled under the onslaught of the Great Depression. Once again, the brothers prepared to make a business trip.

A veteran land authority and employee of the Federal Land Bank sat fretting in his county seat office. He had reported nothing to his supervisor for weeks and was haunted with the thought that he might be replaced.

When the Dahl brothers arrived at the office one morning before it was officially open, he had to guard against over-optimism. His first hope in many days started forming when he interrupted the session long enough to make a phone call and discover that the brothers were considered a good risk.

Peter and Oscar came to the office with eight hundred and twenty dollars. Bargaining continued all morning and part of the afternoon. When they left, it was as owners, in the legal sense, of the half section they had planned to buy years before, plus a quarter section of lesser-valued hay land. Oscar had been apprehensive that they were going overboard. Peter was out to do a stroke of business. The terms were such that it would be difficult to imagine failure in the project. The agent realized that the opportunity was sound in every respect. He felt more like a businessman when the deal was signed. His frustration had been heightened by the fact that even he, a veteran observer, did not realize how pitifully little cash there was on the prairie.

When news of the Dahl brothers' purchase became known, reaction was varied. An old-timer leaned back on his pool hall bench and expressed surprise.

"I figured them boys were smarter 'n that," he wheezed. "Don't they know that the Federal Land Bank calls in all their money every twenty years?"

Caution was still the byword. Peter and Oscar found themselves operating eight hundred acres of land and curious as to what would be their next move. The old situation was reversed – now they had more land than they had plans. Marie was inclined to agree with Oscar that they were overextended. Peter held to his conviction that they had been favored with a rare opportunity.

"If we can scratch along a few years and keep up the taxes, we'll come out good on this," was his analysis.

The issue was not immediately decided. As the trying Thirties ended, there were times when it looked as if the Dahl farm was too big. There was a pleasant feeling, however, when the more extensive field work was completed in late spring.

"If we can hit one good year, we're on our feet," Peter often told his informal evening planning board.

Right or wrong, they were in it, and there was no time for recrimination.

Joe Voss had gone back to active farming.

"Way things are kicking up in Europe," Joe offered, "won't be too long before we'll be pressed to raise more food than any o' us dreamed of."

As history tells us, agricultural production becomes increasingly vital in times of hostility. Just before the decade's end, a mustachioed loudmouth and his eager followers forced a surprising declaration of war, pitting, at first, Germany against France and Britain. There was a feeling that another global conflict was on its way.

The old-timers hoped conditions would return to the stability of the Twenties. But time, it seems, does not have a habit of going backward.

The new decade was welcome. Even school children felt an unexplained lift when they could write 1940 on their papers. The entire prairie noticed that the weather, crops and prices seemed to have a simultaneous change of heart.

The Dahl family sat around the breakfast table on a quiet Saturday morning discussing plans for the new day. It was mid-winter and, having finished with early chores, they heeded no urgent call to duty.

Marie, accustomed to concentration amid noise, was quietly compiling a list of groceries she needed from the village store. She was silently thankful the day had passed when her task was complicated by closely reviewing their limited budget.

The oldest son announced his plans. They all knew what he was going to do. But he felt obligated to point out the recent heavy fall of powdery snow would make trapping excellent. He was a trapper by avocation and had considerable amounts of his Uncle Oscar's quietness and patience. The joys his hobby brought were many and varied, and not all of them occurred on the trapline. He received mail addressed to him in his own name in the form of bulletins and quotations from fur buying companies. Though he was a serious, sober boy, his grin – when he returned home with a good catch – revealed that he would be very reluctant to trade lots with any living being.

Conversation was literally streaming between the two young ladies of the household. The youngest was to entertain a group of guests that very day, the occasion being her birthday. Since she was too young to be an efficient hostess, her sister had been offered the task. Marie had decided her oldest daughter would be capable of the necessary planning and arranging. There had been one stipulation – any quarreling or bickering would cause the management of the affair to revert to Mother. The two young ladies, hesitant to lose this wonderful assignment, were trying their utmost to avoid argument, at least until the party was underway.

It was understood that Peter was going to town. He remarked that he was fortunate in being able to use the automobile at this late stage of the year. The roads had been plowed a few times and had not yet been drifted in with snow, so clearing was abandoned for the season.

The trapper was first to take his leave. The engrossed Dahl sisters continued chattering about their party while Peter and Oscar compared merits of this or that make of farm machinery. Peter asked Oscar if he intended accompanying him to the village, but Oscar had a prospective buyer coming to look at some bull calves.

Peter scooted back his chair slightly as he prepared to rise, and looked at his youngest son who was still without a declared intent.

"What are you gonna do today, Rog?" He asked.

"Pa, I got something to ask you," was the reply.

"Shoot."

"Well, between us kids we got twelve library books that should be returned. If you would let me go to town with you, I'd bring them back and pick out some new ones to bring home."

Peter did not rise, but thoughtfully emitted a long humming noise, glancing at his wife while doing so. Marie nodded almost imperceptibly. "You can go, son, but see you got plenty clothes on."

The wiry little lad bounced off his chair, unable to suppress a victorious grin. Ordinarily, the standing rule decreed that all four children went to the village, or all stayed home. Little Roger had been aware of the rule, but

hungry for books, he decided to make his attempt. He knew the other children were occupied for the day and held his request until it could be presented in a way that would eliminate any suggestion of favoritism.

The morning was spent finishing the first half of the daily chores and preparing for the anticipated afternoon. Peter and little Roger had dinner somewhat earlier than usual and climbed into the stiff, hesitant auto and the trip began.

Snow was piled so high by plowing that visibility to the side was mostly blocked. "Too bad we got so much snow, eh, Pa?" the little passenger observed.

"Don't say that, boy. Lots of snow means new shoes for you and me next fall," his father answered.

A jackrabbit slid into the white lane ahead of the auto and provided laughter for Peter and his son. The springy-legged creature had no difficulty staying out in front of them and scurried off to the side when flatter terrain was reached.

When they arrived at the village, Peter went to the car's trunk and brought out a big horse blanket. This he carefully laid over the hood, tucking in the edges. Roger anxiously assisted in this important operation and, upon completing the job, the traveling partners arranged their rendezvous and parted.

Roger went to the church library as fast as he could walk and still observe the interesting panorama that was part of his path. It was his first trip to the library without benefit of an older comrade. He was careful with the armload of books, conscious that they marked him as a valued delegate.

The only public library within the village bounds was created and maintained by the younger members of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. It was open only on Saturday afternoons. By ordinary standards, the library's content was sparse, but to little Roger the single room was a huge cavern of knowledge.

The librarian, a kindly, middle-aged woman, recognized Roger when he entered with books stacked on his arm like stove wood. She enjoyed visiting with country children, especially when she might help them overcome their characteristic shyness. Roger felt he had met a friend, as he peeled books off his arm before checking them in.

As the return process finished, the librarian was aware of a disturbing situation. One of the dozen books was overdue. It had in all probability been mislaid and thus had not been turned in on time. The mistake could have been easily rectified.

An ink eraser and a casual redating would have been the simplest solution.

Old King Winter

The librarian was an honest woman, and she said to herself, "No, seven cents today, seven thousand tomorrow." She realized the little chap would not understand "overdue" since it was his first attempt at a book transaction. In addition, she had lived through the Thirties and thought it unlikely the boy would have seven cents.

The solution, when it came, was amazingly easy. She simply reached into her purse and transferred a nickel and two pennies to the shoe box marked "Overdue".

Since she and the wide-eyed boy were alone in the room, a pleasant conversation followed. Roger became acquainted with the mechanics of the library. One of the phases discussed was "overdue" and the boy checked the cards against the calendar to be sure he understood what he was learning.

Try as he might, he could only count out eleven books, so he inquired, "I thought I brought back twelve."

"You did, Roger," the librarian replied, "but I'd already started putting them back."

Innocently satisfied, Roger had a request to make.

"I don't notice any clock, Ma'am, so would you please tell me when it's a quarter past four? I must leave then and meet my father.

When his friend assented, Roger became lost in the mysteries of the literary world and was oblivious to time and surroundings.

Peter, meanwhile, was also enjoying his visit to the village. He and a cluster of farmers inspected some of the new models of farm implements. The observation was casual and interspersed with comment on a wide variety of subjects. No matter where their conversational wanderings took them, they always returned to grain crops. Deals quickly closed during springtime had usually been negotiated with leisure in preceding winter months.

The calm winter afternoon raced by, and Peter pulled out his big pocket watch. A glance told him it was time to buy his groceries and take to the road. When Peter reached the store, he found the place crowded. After

several moments of search, he located his son guarding what appeared to be an old, discarded sugar sack half filled with books.

"It's starting to drift pretty good now," the storekeeper warned as he helped load the provisions in the back seat of the auto.

"Yep," Peter answered. "We better plug along for home. The high cuts'll fill up fast, way the wind is pickin' up."

Before Peter and his boy had traveled into open country, gloomy dusk had begun to fall. Peter looked at his watch again – it seemed to be getting dark earlier than usual. Roger was thumbing through a book between bumps in the snowy road. He was abruptly snapped out of his trance when his father shouted above the noise of the car, "Hold tight, Rog, I gotta give 'er all she'll take to get through the snow drift up ahead." The auto skidded somewhat in picking up speed but was able to negotiate the drift.

Peter first became worried when he realized they had barely made it through the swirling snow. Visibility was fast becoming non-existent, so it was risky to plunge headlong into a drift. Another man could have the same idea while approaching the narrow lane.

During a momentary pause in the developing blizzard, Peter got his bearings and realized a long stretch of high walled road was soon to be reached. "This is the bad one boy. We can make this – it's only a few miles home."

The little car, motor roaring, tore into the drifted snow like a terrier after a rat. Halfway through the obstacle, the car could see it was overmatched and forward motion stopped. Peter tried backing up, but it was futile. The powdery snow, whipped by a violent wind, obliterated the tracks that were only seconds old.

Peter yanked his scoop shovel out of the back seat of the auto and tried to clear a trail that would allow them to back out of their predicament. It was almost completely dark, but he could see that he was making no headway. When he opened a little hole in the drift, raging snow filled it right back up. He heard a door banging behind him and looked around to see Roger stretched out along the running board. The lad had stepped out to investigate and had been bowled over by a strong gust. Returning to drag his son into the auto, Peter knew that positive action had to be taken.

The temperature was plummeting, and their situation became downright serious.

"Leave everything right where it is. I'll put the candy in my pockets, and we got to strike off," Peter advised the boy.

"But Pa, the groceries might freeze if we leave 'em."

"Better they freeze than you and me."

"Where we goin', Pa?"

"There should be a haystack a coupla rods back in the corner of this field. We follow the fence line to the corner an' then hope we locate that haystack."

"What if we don't find it, Pa?"

"Then we dig into a snowbank."

They followed the fence by running their hands lightly along the top row of barbed wire. Before they progressed forty yards, plans had to be altered. Roger was unable to keep his balance in the angry wind.

"Here, son," Peter yelled, "grab the belt loop in the back of my coat. Don't struggle, jus' lay back an' paddle. I'll drag you along."

The effort required bordered on the superhuman.

Peter was satisfied – at least the constant pull told him the boy was still with him. In the bitterly cold, swirling darkness, separation for a minute could well mean separation forever.

Peter had a fleeting panic when the battle continued, and no corner was reached. He was mentally rechecking his calculations when he lunged into a barrier. It was the stout corner post. He opened his coat and drew the quivering boy close to him.

"You all right, boy?"

"It's hard to breathe, Pa, but I'm still comin'. Gettin' awful cold."

Peter grappled the little chap to restore circulation while he reviewed his mental picture of the haystack. He decided they would struggle toward the distant opposite corner of the field for twenty paces, then return if necessary to repeat the venture on a different tangent. A mistaken move spelled death and, realizing this, Peter went over the scheme several times before taking a step. They had the fence for a boundary in returning. The biggest hazard would be confusion that would head them away from the corner instead of into it on the return trip.

The first trip was fruitless. Peter had to fight to maintain a clear state of mind. He decided on two more of the expeditions and then into the snowbank. Digging into snow involved risk in severely cold weather. If movement

in the makeshift hole was hampered by shifting snow, the result could only be tragedy. If sleep came, the outcome would be fatal.

On the second trip, Peter's swinging arm brushed the end of the haystack. In circling the stack, they stopped at what Peter knew was the southeast side, because of the slight abatement in the howling wind.

"Rogie, boy, we got it made," Peter roared at his son. He drew the lad into his overcoat and laid out the plan.

"We gotta pull out hay and make a little tunnel into the middle of this stack. Get on your hands and knees an' I'll straddle you. I'll do the pullin' an' drop hay down to you. You throw it back between your legs. We're gonna work hard an' steady, but not so that we get sweated up."

Nature can kill an outdoor man, and this witnessless struggle could only be described as epic. Peter had come to the solution by a combination of instinct and experience. A less-knowing man would have huddled over his car heater until the fuel supply was exhausted or raging snow stopped up the exhaust pipe, allowing deadly, odorless gas to end the sedentary struggle. An excitable man would have scurried into the howling desert of snow in search of a farmhouse. Neither would test the mettle of Old King Winter in the least. The outcome would be certain and only in the element of time would there be a variance.

"Sweatin' yet, partner?"

"No, Pa, I'm comfortable but not sweatin'. Ain't it good to get out of that wind?"

"Yeah. Is that hay packin' in so it's hard to throw back?"

"Kinda, Pa. The tunnel must be fillin' up behind us."

"That's what we want. We're gonna plug up behind us like the Meadowlark does. I figure about four more feet an' it'll widen out enough so we got a nest. Then you'll get yer supper."

"I'm gonna eat hay, Pa?" the boy giggled.

Peter chuckled also. The gravity of the situation was dispelled.

"Don't you remember I got my pockets fulla candy?" Peter had to laugh, so great was the relief he felt.

"Pa, you think of everythin'."

"Case like this, boy, it's either think or die."

In The Nest

Instruction was not completed when father and son lay pressed together in the nest. The labor was finished, but not the entire matter of survival.

"Get all the snow that's in your pants legs or anywhere else an' suck it slow. It'll get you dried off an' give you a drink at the same time. We can get snow outside if we have to stay here for long, but it's a lot of work. An' we just been through a lot."

Roger, with a little boy's supreme confidence in his father, found the experience exciting. He talked on and on in his shrill voice about the trip to town and the attempted return. His father, survival problems defeated, turned to a new worry and was somewhat uncommunicative.

Peter wondered if the birthday party had ended in time for the guests to reach their homes safely. He checked off the probable activities of all his loved ones at the blizzard's arrival. The oldest boy would have returned in time, as he had some chores which would begin well before sundown. If everyone at the girls' birthday party left in time or had the good sense to stay put, things should be in apple pie order. He knew Oscar would minimize the danger he and the boy were in. Oscar and Peter had come through many a tight spot together. Marie would be worried, but Oscar could reason it all out with her.

"You go to sleep, Pa?" Peter had been absorbed and had not realized his son was asking a question.

"What, boy?"

"I read about different places in books where there's palm trees and warm rain, Pa. How come we live here where we have none of those things?"

"I dunno, son," Peter responded. "Not many people can give a sensible answer, if you ask them, how come they're living where they are. Where yer livin' ain't so terribly important anyhow."

"If that ain't important, Pa, what is?"

"Well, now, take a young fella like you. If you get a good woman an' can make a livin' doin' something you like to do, you'll be happy anywhere on the globe."

"You got a good woman, Pa." It was a solemn statement of fact, not a question.

"You're absolutely correct, to put it like they do on the radio."

"You like farmin', Pa?" The boy's questioning continued.

"Sometimes I got my doubts, but I never figured on doin' anything else."

"Smart as you are, you could be anything in the whole, wide world."

Peter smiled in the darkness. He wanted to laugh, but he knew it would only befuddle his earnest little partner.

"You know something, boy?" he asked. "There comes a time when a young fella looks like he's all grown up an' he gets spunky as a yearlin' colt. He gets to figurin' he's way smarter 'n almost anybody. When that time comes for you, might be good to think back to this here haystack, an' remember that you once thought your Pa had some brains."

"When I get big, I'm gonna get a farm near our place an' work it just like you an' Uncle Oscar."

"Don't make up your mind too firm," was the reply. "What you said about bein' anything in the world doesn't really apply to me anymore, but it does to you."

"I'm getting' sleepy, Pa."

"Go on to sleep. I'll doze a little if it doesn't get any colder. Gets cold, though, I'll have to wake you up for a wrestling match."

"That'll be fun, Pa. We should… have some…"

The statement went unfinished and rhythmic breathing indicated that the gallant little explorer had fallen asleep.

Peter was that peculiar type of person who could remind himself while going to bed to get up at three and see if the sow was having little pigs, and then punctually wake up and do exactly that. So, when he decided to sleep in brief snatches, the better to be on guard in the event of further falling temperature, he was able to relax and doze intermittently. He dreamed of boyhood in Minnesota and, waking, thought about it at length. In a drowsy world between sleep and wakefulness, he was back jabbering with Tom in the Fitzgerald Lumber Camp.

There is a statement to the effect that a dying man gets a fast review of his life while in transition. The validity of this is unquestionably open to debate. Were the statement to be amended to read "marooned man," its validity would be undeniable.

Memory went back to the day his hollow-eyed old grandpa came to the camp to fetch the boys home. Peter chuckled as he recalled how Grandpa's whiskers would ruffle up when he was angered. They were good men, though, he concluded, both Pa and Grandpa Hansen. He half-dozed and decided the family would have to make a visit to his old forest home. He was stranded out on the prairie with a brave little rascal his folks had never seen.

An alarm signal raced to Peter's brain. He felt he'd best wake up completely and try to determine how cold it was. The little sleeper beside him did not stir. After Peter was satisfied that they were warm enough for survival, he lay wide-eyed and wakeful for what seemed an interminable time. Strangely, he made no plans, nor did he consider the future. His thinking was about the past and how foolish most of his worries had been.

"Ma, Ma, what's happened?" The little fellow had awakened in the abrupt manner of children and could not immediately guess where he was.

"Easy, Rog," Peter said softly. "We're still in the haystack. How you feelin'?"

"Fine, Pa. How long we been here?"

"That I don't know, son. Reach your hand over here an' we'll eat some more candy."

There was silence, broken only by the sound of smacking lips on the hard candy.

"Pa, I'm not complainin' or anything, but how long will we have to stay here?"

"Stick your hand up on the top of our nest. Feel that vibration? That's the wind. We'll know when the wind goes down, an' we gotta stay here till it does."

More silence, and Peter became slightly uneasy. He had seen a drunken hobo panic when his chums had playfully placed a large packing box over him while asleep. He recognized claustrophobia and knew some people would sooner perish than be confined in a small dark hole such as he and the boy occupied.

Laughter like the report of far-off church bells came from the boy, muffled by the cramped quarters. Peter knew not what to expect but queried Roger softly, "What the dickens got inta you?"

"I been thinkin', Pa. First, I thought maybe you an' me were like skunks, denned up for the winter. Then it come to me what we really are."

"What's that?" Peter was puzzled.

"We're overdue, Pa, that's what we are."

"How you figure that?"

"Well, if a book gets back to the library when it's supposed to, it's due. If it gets back later than that, it's overdue. We didn't get home for supper, so it must be we're overdue."

"You doggone little jackrabbit, I'm proud to see you can still laugh," Peter grinned.

The two talked for hours on subject after subject. School of the day was compared to school of the former day. The Minnesota white-tailed deer was explained to the fascinated boy. Roger marveled at the discipline that kept a fawn in its hideaway, safe under the nose of a hungry prowler. Both marveled at kindly nature, who kept the fawn scentless to assure its survival.

For several years, Peter had secretly felt his little son was very bright. But he realized that practically all fathers have sons who are very bright, and thus had been prone to discount some of the feelings. He was amazed at how much knowledge was tucked away in the little head and decided that maybe most worthwhile knowledge is learned early in life. And not by design, but by accident.

"By golly, kiddo, I believe the wind is dyin' down."

Peter and the lad had been absorbed in conversation and had not checked for vibration of the stack.

"I'm gonna dig out slow and easy. You stay put. If it ain't too bad out there, I'll dig out the whole tunnel comin' back, and we'll be on our way."

Peter squirmed through the passageway, conscious of greater cold as he progressed. He had to blink his eyes for several moments to attain normal vision. He could scarcely stand erect, and guessed they must have been holed up for quite some time. The wind had subsided, and he could see neighbor Peterson's barn and sighed deeply, swinging his arms to improve circulation. His watch said four thirty. As near as he could compute it, they had been dug in for twenty-three hours.

Digging out the boy was a frolic. They tussled near the life-saving haven for several minutes before Peter surmised they were in shape to travel.

Loud crunching snow told them it was bitterly cold. When they passed the site of their mishap, no auto was in evidence. The tremendous blizzard had covered road and car, and all that remained were mounds of gently stirring snow. They concluded, amid laughter, that they would be home in time for supper, even if a day late.

Oscar, looking out the barn door, saw the floundering pair when they were three or four hundred yards from the buildings.

He had been hesitant about leaving the house, but livestock continued eating, storm or no storm. He had disconnected the weakened radio battery since the blizzard had disrupted reception until only a squeaking was received. When early evening brought lowering of winds, Marie had asked Oscar to put the radio back in service. When he left the house, Marie was listening to frequent reports of tragedy caused by the storm. Many lines of communication were down, so the announcer reminded his listeners that the news was incomplete. Oscar ambled back to the house, fearful lest Marie would faint upon seeing her lost men.

Glamorous or Foolish

Marie spied the travelers when they had nearly reached the grove of trees. She screamed and dashed out of the house without coat or overshoes. She had been fighting hysteria for hours and the emotional storm finally broke. Her son plunged through the snow to meet her. Marie fell to her knees in the cold snow and clung to the boy, alternately laughing and sobbing.

"A fine reception we get," Peter laughed. "An' I thought I was top dog around here. Ain't hard to see who you like best." Peter was joking and in an instant all three were babbling at once.

Little Roger had gained considerable prestige over the younger set. He had survived a bad storm. "I knew you'd be alright, Rog," Uncle Oscar told him. "Once many years ago, I was in a tight spot an' I jus' grabbed your Pa's shirttail an' he pulled me outta it."

The little chap, somewhat flustered by the unexpectedly riotous homecoming, minimized the whole affair.

"Was really nothing to get excited about," he said. "We were just a little overdue, that's all."

Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Among many things, he was a great phrasemaker. When war came to the nation, confusing multitudes and confirming the theories of a few prophets, the little village with the church library was not without its own phrasemaker.

"The first American boy to come to grips with the enemy in France was a prairie farmer."

The speaker was the grain elevator man. He was active in the American Legion, had been to college, and subscribed to three major North Dakota newspapers. The fact that he had been "over there" enhanced his position as village oracle. No person of the day inquired into his achievements or duration of combat duty, but he did nothing to dispel his newly acquired cloak of respect.

During the summer that preceded Pearl Harbor, Roger Dahl, with a little boy's characteristic yearning to idolize some dashing figure, had found gratification.

Peterson's two eldest sons had returned from Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, for a furlough. They were soldiers of the prairie's own Thirty-Fourth Division, an Army infantry outfit. And Roger could not resist going through

waving grain fields to visit these men who had somehow changed from ordinary boys to glamorous knights in olive drab uniform.

With a stroke of good fortune, Roger found the two soldiers lolling in the shade of the front porch, enjoying their unusual status of late risers.

Peterson's boys, absorbed in the intricacies of their new profession, talked nothing but Army.

"An' I sez to him, 'Better wait till yer barrack's bag stops swingin' for ya to tell an ole G.I. somethin'."

"I remember that guy," replied the younger of the two. "I tole him 'I got more time in the chowline 'n you got in the Army.'"

Roger's eyes raced from speaker to speaker.

There was a long critique on their night training missions. The hazards of infantry, engineers, artillery and other branches were discussed. The pleasant morning and rapt audience encouraged the session. It ended only when Mrs. Peterson called her boys in for dinner.

Roger had to decline the invitation to join the Petersons. In his haste to leave home, he had neglected to get permission to stay for a meal. In addition, he was near giddiness from the amazing talk and felt he had best sort out and arrange what he learned, and then return later for further enlightenment.

Hours later, when his share of the evening chores was finished, Roger stretched out on the lawn to read the paper. The first item that met his eye was an account of the Camp Claiborne training program involving, of course, the Thirty-Fourth Division.

An idea of stunning potential came to Roger as he lay on his stomach pulling out tender shoots of grass while he considered it. Exploits of a great outfit like the Thirty-Fourth Division should not go unrecorded. And he had received a scrapbook as a birthday gift to serve as an ideal store house for clippings like those that lay before him.

Idea jelled into avowed policy, and when Marie and Peter learned of the hobby, Roger's news horizon became widened. Peter told his boy he would ask the grain elevator man to save some clippings, since that worthy man received so many newspapers. Roger started his scrapbook with the article he had read on the lawn and waited expectantly for the outcome of his father's request. When Peter next went to the village, the issue did not long remain in doubt.

The grain elevator man was a strong supporter of the American Legion's youth development program. Peter was his friend and valued customer.

"Sure, I'll be glad to save articles. Thought of it myself, but you know how it is with me, always busy. You should be proud o' that boy, Pete."

"I guess I am," Peter replied.

The project was launched full scale. Roger's oldest sister believed the scrapbook did not show impartiality. She reminded him that many fine area boys served in other units, some even in the Marines or Navy.

Admitting the accuracy of his sister's observation, Roger explained that he would be unable to keep an account of the whole Army. And since most of the men he knew personally were in the Thirty-Fourth, he felt he would concentrate on that outfit. Also, the Peterson boys had told him straight out that the Red Bull Division was the Army's best.

The shock of Pearl Harbor Day caused a plodding American Army to energize itself overnight. And the nation, fortunately only a short step from pioneer days, took up arms to go out and meet the enemy. The stirring of troops caused the scrapbook to take on a new bulk.

Cold weather reduced travel, so the grain elevator man accumulated quite a stack of clippings for his little friend, the Dahl boy. But he was a man who disposed of his problems by the shortest and most direct method possible.

He calculated the departure of the rural mail carrier and arranged to stride over to the little post office at the most strategic moment.

The rural mail carrier had just finished tossing his bags into the rear seat of his sedan when he looked up and saw the grain elevator man. The latter shoved out a bundle of news clippings well tied with binder twine, and said firmly, "Here, I want you to put this in Pete Dahl's mailbox."

The rural mail carrier fidgeted in his tracks and finally decided, "I can't do it."

"Why in hell can't you do it?" the elevator man snorted.

"I can't haul anything that didn't go through the post office."

"Why not?"

"I'm a government employee, and it ain't in the best interests of the government."

"Is it against the best interest of the government to accommodate a fine, young American boy who shows interest in current events?"

The mailman was between a rock and a hard spot. The argument had good logic on both sides, so he tried a new tack, "Besides, the postmaster don't like it," he added.

"You put this in the mailbox, and to hell with the postmaster." The grain elevator man's voice had a note of finality in it. He turned abruptly and went into the tavern.

Not knowing exactly what to do with the bundle, the rural mail carrier looked around the deserted street for a furtive moment and tossed it among the mail bags.

As he left the village, the mail carrier pondered the illegal deed he was about to do. His chagrin was not directed at the grain elevator man, but rather another object.

"If the postmaster don't like it," he muttered, "he can kiss my ass. I'll go to the west coast and work in a defense plant."

Roger's pet outfit gained a valuable addition in the strenuous Italian campaign. Special Japanese-American combat teams were made part of the Thirty-Fourth. The world was amazed at how those troopers, generally originating in sunny clime, literally fought like tigers in the cold, snowy Italian hills. And did it partially out of a desire to prove their sincerity, despite the fact that some of their kinfolk were behind barbed wire in the United States.

The war provided Roger's first real meeting with grief.

Mr. and Mrs. Peterson received one of the dreaded telegrams. Their youngest son had been killed in action in Italy. Since his final letter had mentioned playing pool, and little Roger was familiar with battle terrain, the boy correctly deduced that it must have occurred on the plain that was nicknamed "Venafro Pool Table".

Confirmation came when the surviving son returned home on a plan to relieve troops, known as "rotation."

Roger sobbed quietly in his bed, grasping a little of the finality of it all. How could such a knowing, dashing combat trooper ever get in a situation that would cause his death? From that night on, mankind's great game lost part of its enchantment. Attempting to piece it all together in boyish fashion, Roger fell asleep, not sure if war could best be described as glamorous or foolish.

New day brought new outlook. The Peterson boy who had returned dropped in for a short visit. He was a battle-hardened soldier and took the loss with less evident grief than did Roger. With typical American facility for

adjustment, young Peterson had already mentally crossed his brother's name off the roster. He had no way of knowing that maturity would bring reflection, and he would often picture his brother, from toddler stage to early grave in Italy.

Though young Peterson would occasionally think about war during his years, conviction would finally be reached when his own sons faced the prospect of another war to end wars, to preserve this or that.

There is little place for grief in the makeup of a sprouting man, and Roger continued his intensive scrapbook campaign.

When V-E Day came, it brought an end to the project. Pasted months later, its final entry told of a monument to be constructed in their little village that would list all war dead of the community.

On it would be forged twenty-three names.

Life or College?

A country boy beginning his high school career is a prime example of a young man in crisis. The first few days were bewildering. After initial confusion subsided, Roger was amazed at the difference that existed between the lofty senior and the insignificant freshman. So far as he could see, the basic difference was four years of time.

The first year was mainly orientation. Marie was apprehensive over Roger's failure to maintain his usual high scholastic standing. Oddly, the thief of previous high ranking was the sudden accessibility to a more extensive library. Algebra held not the fascination that was found in accounts of the settling of the West. Roger instinctively discovered the level of study required to get by adequately in the classroom and paced himself accordingly.

The sophomore year was, in general, a repetition of the beginning year. The only added feature was the experience of being the butt of sly, meaningless jokes which showed that all sophomores were mysteriously given to mental lapses. Roger understood that jokesters noticed this condition.

It was only in the third year, when the library had been thoroughly explored, that Roger took more than passing interest in his classwork. His increasing interest was stimulated by an instructor who was a firm believer in classroom discussion.

Some top students did not understand much of what they had learned. Quoting textbooks about incidents still controversial revealed books sometimes held opposing views. A few of the girls, who had been star students all their academic lives, became unsteady during vigorous discussion. But they consoled themselves by labeling the Dahl boy only a radical.

No one had a right to question the printed word, they agreed. That boy could not possibly come to a good end, because he failed to accept things at face value.

During the last half of his final year in the little high school, Roger got himself in hot water. English Four selected several student papers for publication in the mimeographed high school paper – Roger's being one. The subject was "Tomorrow's Educational System."

It was an innocent appearing article and would have passed unnoticed, except that a woman in the P.T.A. took offense.

The opening statement was "Spring rain had provided the Plains Indian with an abundance of high protein food and he was itching to counterattack, but was deterred by the swollen river and the White Man's new gun that did not require reloading."

The author then asked where in present-day learning this statement would likely be brought up. It would have bearing in geography, history, sociology, home economics and possibly a few other subjects.

Roger theorized that since history and geography are so closely connected, they could best be taught simultaneously. He went on to criticize the system that separates them and places more importance on dates than on the significance of the event.

Roger had read that the average person calls on less than half his potential in his everyday life. The habit might well have been formed in school life – in the struggle with a series of dehydrated, disconnected facts – he affirmed confidently.

"Tomorrow's educational system," the paper read, "will try to correct parental mistakes in human relations in the earliest school years, and then sort its learning into periods of time instead of specific subjects. In this day of progressing communication, we may have to reveal that our past is rich in human personalities to an extent seldom known in the world of fiction. Education must compete with 'Sky King' and 'Superman.' The child who struggles with inattentiveness at school is often so absorbed reading 'funny books' that he knows not time or place. Can we say to a child, 'You must be interested in what we're doing,' and have the admonishment become fact? It would be as logical to advise the planets to come close for better observation."

The P.T.A. members were, for the most part, sincere, level-headed people. But a lady who had a strong sense of propriety and an affinity for the established order of things decided that Roger was worse than a radical. He was an out-and-out ingrate. And she let it be known to the school principal that he best talk to that young man. In the interest of harmony, the principal consented. But he did so nervously.

The last time he had been called in as mediator, the "crusade echelon" of the P.T.A. had been embroiled in a verbal battle over what our schools prepare a youngster for – life or college? The principal, realizing he couldn't win, had walked a tightrope between the factions that left the issue so obscured it was abandoned.

"Roger," the principal began, "it is felt in some quarters that your opinions on education are, shall we say, somewhat premature."

"That's possible, Sir," the boy offered. "But that's my opinion, and I guess I'm stuck with it."

"Do you realize you may have trod on some toes?"

"I don't feel that I did. There's an opinion that in the future, man won't resemble today's man. He'll be a creature with a large head and tiny feet, and by our present standards, he'll be almost grotesque. That's no reflection on you or me, unless we decide for some reason to be offended."

"What makes you feel there's so much lacking in the present-day school?"

"So many things were dry when I studied them in school, and so interesting when I looked around and read the same thing in a different setting, like a novel."

"You don't believe we're making school interesting enough?"

"That's about it, Sir," the boy said with a far-off glance.

"People like Franklin and Jefferson were just names when I studied history. Reading beyond the textbook has shown me they were unusually talented men, and human beings, too."

"Do you realize, Roger," the principal was serious, "that never before has so much learning been available to so many people?"

"It sounds good, Sir," Roger was also serious, "but it proves nothing. That statement was undoubtedly also true a century ago."

"There still is no excuse for anyone who has the desire for learning in this country to fail in getting it. Roger, tell me this, when did you first come to this viewpoint?"

"I think it was when I spoke with an exchange student from Europe. I believe I have a fair knowledge about what's good in our system, so I asked him what he felt was bad."

The principal leaned back in his chair and gazed out the window. The session was not going smoothly. He had allocated five minutes for the talk, and it seemed they were getting more involved rather than reaching a subtle chastisement.

Anxious to get on with his business and reach a conclusion, he asked, "What is wrong, in his opinion?"

"We aren't accomplishing what we should – given the time we spend in school," was the forthright reply.

"Why?"

"First of all, we've tended to downgrade the teaching profession, financially and otherwise. Secondly, we often won't allow our children to learn basic disciplines. Third, we really aren't concerned whether students learn anything or not, if they get by and don't reflect poorly on the family name."

"Roger," the principal was aghast, "do you agree with that line of thought?"

"Not completely, but I wouldn't say the student was altogether out of his head. He did bring up a point that I figured was sound, though, and not quite so controversial."

"Which was what?"

"The American student is brought up with so many intense loyalties to athletic teams, social clubs, schools and towns that he often overlooks a really important loyalty – loyalty to the human race."

The principal had abandoned plans for gentle rebuke. He sat motionless, drumming his fingers quietly on the arms of his chair.

Here was a boy who missed quite a few of the standard quiz answers. And apparently found answers that were not in the textbook.

"Roger," he said, "I have an appointment in a minute or two. Let's adjourn and consider the matter closed."

As the boy was about to leave the office, the principal recalled a concept that was drifting in his head for several weeks.

"Roger, what do you believe a student should be prepared for – life or college?"

"Regardless of what we're prepared for, it's life we get, Sir." The boy turned quietly and walked out of the office.

Never Been Better

It is early spring, and water is trickling slowly off the roof of the barn. There is not yet exposed forage for the livestock, and the brothers are in the barn filling the troughs in preparation for the return of the exploring herd.

A farmer is made somewhat lethargic by spring's return, so the brothers have time to visit as they meander about the spacious barn.

"What's that little squirt Roger talkin' about in Philadelphia?" Oscar questions his brother.

"Little squirt, you say," Peter returns. "He's bigger 'n you or me."

"I know that, but I can't believe he's growed up already."

"He ain't. That 'grown up' is a misleading term. I was grown up when I was sixteen. When I was thirty-six, I began to doubt that I really was grown up. Now I ain't sure any of us ever grow up."

"What I'm getting' at is this. Is he givin' a talk about college, or farmin', or what?" Oscar asks.

"He's talkin' about tolerance," Peter answers as he stopped to sit on the edge of a bench.

"Tolerance – the kind of a 'preacher 'n the bear' situation where you try to keep from harmin' others. Like the preacher said, 'Lawd, if you can't help me, for goodness' sake, don't help that bear."

"Don't seem like that's anythin' to go a coupla thousand miles to talk about."

Peter scratches his nose and replies carefully. "The subject is big enough so Roger and hundreds more like him could spend a lifetime discussin' it."

"I don't see where that kid gets the nerve to go way out East an' talk to a bunch of people."

"Look at it this way, Oscar. Any kid born in this country has a background that extends to some courageous people in the past who had the get up an' go to leave their established homes and venture into what was practically unknown."

"Yeah," Oscar counters, 'but that was years ago."

"You know cattle, don't you, Oscar?"

"I'm s'posed to."

"Well, then, you know you can't breed in quality in one generation. You also know that when you get it, it don't disappear in one generation."

"What you leadin' up to?"

"Jus' this – this country is still in its infancy. The people that settled it were the adventurous an' daring from the then-civilized world. Does it seem likely that all the good qualities from our settling should vanish so quickly?"

"Read the newspapers," Oscar advises. "Juvenile delinquency is increasin'. We still got discrimination an' segregation."

"That's true. We're a long way from bein' in good shape. We been in a period where things have more value than people. Our grandpa thought nothin' of walkin' ten miles to visit a neighbor. Now, Roger tells me a big city looks more like a cattle stampede than anythin'. And very few people know their next-door neighbor or have any desire to know him.

"The question comes to me," Oscar muses, "are we makin' progress, or ain't we?"

"We ain't accomplished anythin' if we figure out a time savin' gadget that cuts down on a person's work so he or she will have more time to visit a psychiatrist. We ain't done nothin' if we raise our standard of livin' so every family can afford to keep the kids in day nursery or boarding school. When courtesy, honesty and courage get to be old fashioned, there's no amount of gadgets that make up for the loss."

"My question, again – are we making progress or ain't we?" Oscar, the persistent, asks.

"I don't know if we're makin' progress. Progress applies mostly to people an' their thinkin'. We're in a class by ourselves in the gadget department, we are. How do you see it, Oscar?"

"I can't help believin' we're makin' headway. Look at Roger. He's gonna be a better man than you or me."

"All right, we'll look at Roger. What you see didn't happen overnight. When he tackles a job, he's got the same stubbornness ol' Grandpa Hansen had. Now that quality goes back hundreds of years to the time when wise men told the people in the low countries in Europe to move out, because the water would surely come in an' drown

them all. They figured on stayin' and livin' there, come hell or high water. Some might call it ignorance that they stayed. I call it courage. Anyhow, they're still there today, and doin' fine.

"In that kid is some of the inventiveness an' logic of the German. They had good roads an' neat towns over there when we only had buffalo trails here. Hadn't been for war, be no way of imaginin' where that nation would be today. Lot of our advantage in this country is due to the fact we ain't been tore up by war."

"You put me in mind," Oscar speaks in the momentary lull, "of the way Pa used to tell about the old country."

"When I think of Roger goin' to Philadelphia, it makes me remember some of those stories, too. There's quite a bit of the Norse Viking left in that boy. Them Vikings roamed wherever water would take 'em, in spite o' the fact that the best minds of that time figured the world was flat, and a sailor who went too far in any direction would fall off the face of the earth, with certain destruction. Yet, when the Viking decided to go on a trip, nothin' held him back. The odds were poor for 'em any time they set out."

"What in hell ever stopped a bunch of fellas like that?" Oscar chews on a spear of hay and ponders.

"I have an idea it was that they got to piratin'. Though the Norwegian still goes to sea today, them early Vikings lost somethin' when they started plunderin', and soon they were no longer at the head a' the class."

"Compared with what them Vikings done, it ain't too complicated to go out East an' do a little talkin'. Easy for me to say it, but I doubt if I could do it."

Peter speaks in the typically quiet barn.

"Well, there's a lot to support the notion that progress is being made. Nearly everyone today knows things a genius couldn't imagine a few years ago. That don't mean we have arrived, as they say. Look at the automobile accidents we have today. Horsepower is increasing faster than thinkpower. We lose more people on the highways than we do in wars. And we have among us today people who would rather die than let some guy who's a mite more foolish pass 'im. That's only one of the places where we got improvement to make. We still can't stand anyone who has an opinion that's opposite o' what's popular at the moment. A guy comes up with something that don't sound favorable, we don't examine what he says, we call him names. An' if he don't learn to keep his mouth shut, we point him out to some politician or opinion writer whose hobby it is to appeal to the more childish things in human nature. We worry about a bomb and ignore juvenile delinquency. How the hell are we going to figure out a potential enemy when we're puzzled by our own offspring? I don't mean to sound downhearted, Oscar, I bring this up only to show how much progress we still got to make."

"Listenin' to you, Peter, I ain't sure whether we'll make it or not."

Scratching his once black, now silver hair, Peter responded carefully.

"We'll make it, hands down. But only if we want to. If the civilized world wants to commit mass suicide, it's getting' easier to do every day. One thing's certain, if our system is wrong, it ain't gonna last. An' we may have reached the point where we got to wonder if we want to survive. Man is a pretty young creature. Could be there's some of the same instinct in him that the lemming in Norway has. Every so often those little buggers took a notion to migrate to the sea an' drown themselves. I hope we got more sense than that. I guess only time will tell for sure."

With a distant look to their eyes, the brothers stand in silence amongst the sweet-smelling hay, letting their conversation find a soft resting place.

"Peter, what's that I hear? Sounds like a car or a truck, don't it?"

"It does at that, who you s'pose is comin'?"

"By golly, it looks like the mailman's outfit. He better give 'er tarpaper through that drift."

"What you s'pose he's doin' in here? Hope he fetched the mail instead o' leavin' it in the box."

The brothers saunter out toward the farmyard to meet their guest. Peeking from the snow, patches of bare ground appear in the yard, and the mailman carefully seeks a series of firm areas to turn his vehicle around.

When he steps out of his car, he has the mail tucked under one arm and holds a single envelope gingerly in his hand.

"Hullo, Pete. Hi, Oscar. Mighty fine day."

"It is for a fact," Oscar replies, as he is nearer the speaker.

"Got somethin' here for you, Pete."

The mailman advances and Peter stands motionless, his ruddy cheeks glowing. It's a telegram. Country folk are wary of this type of communication. Only a phone call late at night is comparably ominous.

"Hope nothin's happened to one o' the kids," Peter whispers. His hands shake slightly as he carefully pulls open the message.

He reads the little page several times.

“Proud to let you know I met your son. Will send message with boy. See you next summer. Dr. Thomas Wood.”

The mailman has no intention of leaving until the contents of the message has been thoroughly appraised.

“Bad news, Pete?”

“It’s from a friend o’ mine. Guess he’s livin’ in the East somewhere.”

Peter is grinning while he gestures with the sheet of paper.

“Seems he met our kid at that spiel goin’ on in Philadelphia.”

“Everything okay then, Pete?” The mailman shuffles carefully in his tracks, preparatory for departure.

“Yessir, everything’s okay. In fact, things never been better.”

“You know, Peter,” Oscar breaks his silence.

“Things really are okay.

There’s good news whichever way you turn,

an’ on top o’ that,

won’t be long ‘till the meadowlark comes back.”

THE END

Nelson in 1947

The Meadowlark Comes Back

Penned in 1947, Nelson's masterwork is a tale about working-class Scandinavians navigating a young America, and their journey toward purposeful lives – fueled by curiosity, hope, and an unflinching work ethic. Starting in the mid-1800s, the story uncoils with a clarity and utility consistent with the northern plains, handy for rendering insightful portrayals of people and their experiences. Nelson's prophetic observations call out the challenges facing America today, including the intense loyalties that continue to annoy the American experience. He suggests that each of us can bring about the cure. Raised within earshot of pioneering Scandinavian emigrants, the author was steeped in compelling human stories before joining University of North Dakota's debate team – competing in speech contests throughout the region. During the Great Depression, and with flagging interest in academia, his studies became mobile,

electing to ride freight trains as an unticketed passenger in search of work, life and its unscheduled lessons. The author passed away quietly in 1981 while securely nestled in the forestlands of Shasta County, California.

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